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Investigating partnership working in voluntary and community organisations: delivering learning and skills.

**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF
DOCTOR of EDUCATION (EdD)**

Helen Britton, MEd (Adult Continuing Education and Training)

Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology

Open University

Student PI: M9789324

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examines the perceptions and experiences of individuals who deliver learning and skills training as part of multi-agency and cross-sector collaborative partnership arrangements. It asks the question: ‘How does the experience of delivering learning and skills development in partnerships with other organisations affect voluntary and community organisations?’

The findings from twenty-five, semi-structured interviews, demonstrate a complex and often highly contentious picture of collaborative working practice. This study reveals a number of contradictory themes concerning increased levels of risk-taking and risk-avoidance; the importance of the role of trust; resource and capacity inequalities and the increasing levels of expectation to do more with less in a challenging funding environment. It questions the basis on which policy decisions are being constituted and the increasing expectation for organisations to work in partnership. The evidence base is not fully representative of the perceptions and experiences of individuals. It indicates a lack of understanding of how the highly differentiated nature of voluntary and community organisations, and their partners, experience partnership-working and the implications this may have for learners. The review of the literature for this research study adopted a broad ‘brushstroke’. It did so in order to examine, and to attempt to understand, the complex, conceptual and theoretical ‘landscape’ involving voluntary and community partnership activity. This research suggests that partnership can be better understood through a meta-theoretical framework. In theorising the role of partnership, this thesis presents a multi-theoretical model to represent some of the tensions inherent in inter-organisational collaboration. It integrates theories around trust, organisation and paradox to articulate a layered conceptual typology.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background

The research aim of this study is to investigate how the experience of delivering learning and skills training in partnerships affects voluntary and community organisations.

The initial impetus behind this research emerged during my previous academic studies and my experiences as a tutor, lecturer and training provider. These roles required me to develop literacy and numeracy provision in community-based contexts across the North West of England. Many of these learning opportunities were facilitated through public, private, voluntary and community agencies working collaboratively. The focus was on providing accessible learning opportunities that addressed issues around thinking of groups of learners as ‘hard-to-reach’ and instead thought of provision that was inaccessible or unwelcoming, as ‘hard-to-reach’, not the learners (Grief et al, 2002). Many of these initiatives had provided the opportunity for significant skills development and innovative, enterprising, collaborative relationships between community-focused and community-based public, private, voluntary and community agencies. For a period of about ten years, from the mid 1990’s, locally-facilitated collaborative initiatives had recruited hundreds of adults and young learners onto courses and signposted them to other local providers.

This proliferation of collaborative arrangements had produced a fragmented but diverse base of learning and skills providers across the regions of the North West of England. Many were able to design and implement innovative, enterprising and engaging learning opportunities; often out of very small grants and sporadic sources of funding. Some

providers became extremely adept at being able to deliver excellent training on a range of subjects, such as: web design, horticulture, practical construction skills, creative media and health and fitness. Some provision was specifically designed to embed numeracy, literacy and language skills and to assess those areas during a programme of learning. Many of these courses were short but were viewed by providers; many of whom were voluntary and community organisations, as ways of creating interest from local authority funding, housing association grants, local schools and colleges. It was hoped that this interest would facilitate more inclusivity within communities and provide routes to more secure funding for local agencies to be able to continue to offer this broad but targeted provision.

Developing learning opportunities within existing local facilities, was a logical progression for many faith groups, community centres and other third sector agencies. Having a broad base of sustainably-funded, certificated programmes; linked to other provision and specifically-focused on the needs of local people provided new opportunities. This was particularly welcome with the uncertainty of short-term funding.

Many of the short 'taster' courses offered to learners, were supported out of small amounts of funding and were viewed as 'first steps' provision into learning (DfES, 2004). These 'first steps' into learning were seen as being vital for encouraging individuals who were returning to learning, or accessing it for the first time, and whose point of entry was not through established providers or institutions (Watters, 2005:1). It provided 'signposted' routes into other forms of learning with other local providers. Some of this provision was accredited as Level 1 courses through the 'Qualification and Credit Framework' (Q.C.F) and provided learners with a unit-by-unit route to building their confidence, learning, skills and boosting their employability. As a lack of confidence and poor self-esteem are viewed as attitudinal barriers to learning, for some learners, gaining new skills and building

confidence will be a gradual process which takes time and requires a suitable environment for the learner (LSC, 2003). Much of this provision had learners in mind, as more traditional routes into learning and skills development had not worked for them or had never been attempted. These opportunities were demonstrating success after success at engaging individuals who were often referred to as 'hard-to-reach' (Grief et al, 2002).

In the introduction to 'The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain' (DFEE, 1998), the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett said:

"To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with the rapid change we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite: we will need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people."

Blunkett (DFEE, 1998) made a case for encompassing the range of possibilities in developing education and skills from post-school to post-retirement. Whilst extolling the academic achievements for many people, he also highlighted that weaknesses lay in the basic and intermediate skills.

Whilst many of these collaborative opportunities were 'textbook' examples of how to set-up an effective, well-managed, collaborative learning opportunity, based on mutual trust, respect and good working practices, many were not. As a practitioner, I felt passionately that when it worked it should work for all partners. The outcomes for learners often exceeded what organisations, acting independently, would have been able to have achieved. However, what concerned me was a developing awareness of the difficulties in being able to obtain funding for the type of learning described. This also paralleled with the growth of a less harmonious environment for collaborative partnership work.

Since the global economic downturn of 2007/8, I had been witnessing an increasing numbers of voluntary and community groups, who offered learning and skills training in the areas where I was working, either stop offering courses or reduce what they were able to offer. Several had been in direct response to a sudden contraction in local funding and three others had been affected by competition from public sector agencies; with whom they had previously been working in collaborative partnerships. This meant that some organisations, who were losing all or significant parts of their core funding, could no longer offer skills and learning development within their catchment area. As a result, they were either forced to significantly reduce their level of service or to promote their physical resources, such as their premises and/or free time in partnership arrangements, as a means of maintaining their local presence. Some became little more than community ‘satellite’ bases for their local further education colleges. Whilst learning and skills development was still able to continue, it reduced some VCOs to caretakers and landlords and not providers. According to Coffield (2000:1), despite all the focus on lifelong learning and the learning society, the focus still remains on formal provision, qualification and accountability and places a question mark over the future of different types of learning experiences.

1.2 The significance of this research

This study’s initial review of the literature highlighted that the concept of partnership is of growing importance across a wide range of government agendas. This is manifested in the rhetoric that encourages organisations to increase their efficiency, share services and resources and to construct shared economic development strategies. Integral to achieving many of these goals is changing working practices and making changes happen. There is a significant body of literature which suggests that partnership working is currently under-achieving in practice what it aspires to in policy; part of the problem is in the difficulty of

being able to define and conceptualise what ‘partnership’ is (Ballock and Taylor, 2001:6). It is the non-specificity of the terms that is believed to provide a political advantage with “its key overarching and unifying imagery” (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002:33). Due to the difficulty in defining the notion of ‘partnership’, it has a quality that has enabled it to be ‘moulded’ to a diversity of local, national and international contexts (Clarke and Glendinning, 2002). Like many terms that are over-exposed, they eventually lose some of their meaning. This has resulted in the term ‘partnership’ “having ascended to the ranks of a high level of use but a low level of meaning” (Walmsley, 2006: 5-12). It is these qualities that resulted in the Audit Commission’ (1998:16) describing the term partnership as a “slippery concept” due to the lack of a single agreed definition of what is meant by it. It is little wonder that Glendinning (2002a:3) described ‘partnership’ as “largely a rhetorical invocation to a vague idea”. Despite this proliferation of definitions, drawn from management, business and organisational theory, none of them are able to offer a definitive set of characteristics for the government’s notion of ‘partnership’ between the voluntary and community sector (Goddard, 2006:1).

There has been an increase in the activity, and research, which focuses on third sector activity and on partnership-working (Alcock, 2010a). There is little empirical evidence that examines the impact of collaborative practice on partners and on the learners and clients who are the recipients of their services. According to Macmillan (2011), “There is very little known about the complex array of circumstances which might make for sustainable and ‘resilient’ third sector organisations and about the everyday experiences of third sector organisations attempting to endure, develop and achieve their objectives”.

This study is significant on a number of levels. It challenges the ‘philosophy’ of partnership as being premised on trust, equity and fairness. It highlights the disparity of

power that exists between partners and the significance of contradictory evidence. It indicates a fractured 'landscape' that is constituted of 'fault lines'. It explores their potential to undermine the opportunities that partnership and partnership-working can present for individuals, organisations, learners and the broader contexts in which they are located. Furthermore, it acknowledges that the rhetoric surrounding the collaborative activities involving third sector agencies, and their partners, provides a less than representative picture of the experiences of individuals whose professional practice requires them to work collaboratively. The qualitative descriptions and analysis from this study can contribute to the qualitative, community-based research that focuses on the perception of individuals in under-represented areas (Warren and Webb, 2007). It is only in an equitable representation of partnership stakeholders, that a more detailed picture of the dynamics of these practices; how they deliver or under-deliver, can be better understood (Walker and Avant, 2005). This study also contributes a metaphorical model, through which to gain a clearer understanding of the theoretical and practical elements which constitute this arena of research activity. By so doing, it draws on theoretical perspectives that focus on issues around trust, organizational change and paradox. This study locates its multi-theoretical approach within a critical-interpretive paradigm.

The timing of this research is appropriate as many voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are experiencing significant change and are likely to continue to do so in the future (Sterling, 2002; OGC, 2003; Stern and Green, 2005). They are experiencing increasing levels of accountability, higher levels of expectations to deliver more services with fewer resources and to deliver them in collaboration with a range of other service providers (Ling, 2000; Warmington et al, 2004). As a way of working, partnership working has been evidenced in academic literature and policy documentation for more than forty years (Balloch and Taylor, 2001). Despite the academic attention levied towards the term

‘partnership’, there have been few attempts at linking conceptual models of partnership with actual partnership activity and outcome; indicating a lack of theory concerning partnership activity (Powell and Dowling, 2006:305). The proliferation of the term ‘partnership’, and its associated synonyms, has become widely acclaimed as being of central importance to underpinning many government policy agendas; reflected in its increasing use across official publications (Craig et al, 2004). Yet, too often the government agendas are not sufficiently ‘joined-up’ to enable lessons to be learned from very similar experiences across different policy areas (Cardini, 2006).

What is evident in the ‘sweep’ of the literature is how little of it focusses on the perceptions and experiences of those individuals who work in partnership arrangements with different agencies (Wilkinson and Craig, 2002; Wildridge et al 2004). This research aims to improve the understanding of partnership-working involving voluntary and community organisations who deliver learning and skills initiatives.

1.3 Research Approach and the link with the research questions

My professional experience, and my initial review of the literature, suggested that there were a number of issues, and challenges, to working in partnership that had the potential to affect the practices of learning and skills providers and the experiences of their learners (Wilson and Charlton, 1997; Meade and O’Donovan, 2002; Meade, 2005). The main purpose of this study was to identify what these were. The research questions presented below have, therefore, been informed from a level of a priori knowledge and professional experience of the dynamics of partnership-working. The background to this study and the initial review of the literature, have helped to frame the four research questions presented in 1.3. The title of this thesis suggests the main research question which asks:

How does the experience of delivering learning and skills development in partnerships affect voluntary and community organisations?

It seemed appropriate to investigate, as part of this research study, how knowledge of these factors can be utilized in order to contribute towards informing policies which affect VCOs, their learners and the wider arena of TSOs. Therefore, the following three subsidiary research questions were formulated in order to underpin the main research question presented above:

What are the issues and challenges facing voluntary and community organisations who work in partnership?

How are the practices of individuals who work in voluntary and community organisations affected by them?

How can knowledge of issues and challenges, of working in partnership, contribute towards improving practice and informing policy?

In this study, the participants constitute the experts whose extensive and diverse experiences of working in partnership, provide insights into community-based learning and skills development in areas of the North West of England. All participants either deliver learning and skills courses or they carry out dual roles in seeking the funding, collaborative support and recruiting of learners to facilitate them. The research questions of this study emerge from the need to understand the nature of community-based partnership working between voluntary and community agencies and their partners.

1.4 Overview of the thesis structure

Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework for understanding partnerships. It provides an overview of theoretical concepts and constructs that have been helpful in this research. The chapter presents and critiques these approaches and questions what they add to the research. It also examines the limitations inherent within each of them. I discuss some of the contradictions evident in the exploration of the literature. In so doing, this Chapter Two makes the case for the theoretical framework which is adopted within this research study.

Chapter Three discusses the methodology employed for this research and the formulation of the research questions. Chapter Four presents the methods and an overview of the process through which the interviews were conducted and the key messages which emerged from them. Chapter Five and Chapter Six present the findings from the analysis of the twenty-five respondent interviews. Chapter Seven discusses the findings in more detail by placing them within the context of the literature. It answers the research questions in line with the findings and the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study. Chapter Eight revisits the arguments presented in this thesis; provides a brief account of the research undertaken and the contribution it makes to knowledge. It discusses the model presented from this study and makes a number of recommendations for future research in this area.

1.5 Definition of key terms

This thesis aims to assemble a wide range of conceptual devices, ideas and perspectives that have the potential to produce theory. It is important that there is clarity in the use of

the concepts, and their definitions, as different terms can result in different methodological implications (Bassey, 1990; Banister et al, 1994). This section clarifies some of the key concepts used throughout this study. Others will be defined within the context of each chapter.

According to Jacox (1974), the notion of a ‘concept’ is a useful device as it helps us to organise the world around us whilst remaining an abstract representation of reality. In analysing a concept, there needs to be clarification of ambiguous and vague terms and operational definitions as these determine the defining characteristics of it (Walker and Avant, 2005). Whilst this study is not methodologically underpinned by a discourse analytic approach, it does identify the importance of building concepts through the use of language (Fairclough, 2003). This thesis uses the following definition of ‘partnership’ as I believe that it represents the most inclusive representation of the collaborative partnership arrangements involving voluntary and community organisations:

‘a joint working arrangement, including cross-sector alliances, where partners are otherwise independent bodies, in which individuals, groups or organisations agree to work together to fulfill an obligation, undertake a specific task, share the risk as well as the benefits and review the relationship regularly; revising their agreement as necessary’ (Adapted from Tennyson, 1998 and the Audit Commission, 1998).

There is a range of terminology relating to this way of working; one of which is partnership-working (Fox and Butler, 2004). As a concept, partnership-working is poorly defined (Glasby et al, 2011). The Audit Commission (1998) defines partnership-working as: “A joint working arrangement where the partners are otherwise independent bodies; agree to co-operate to achieve a common goal; create a new organizational structure or process to achieve this goal.” There are a number of other terms that are often used

interchangeably with the term ‘partnership’: multi-agency working (Atkinson et al, 2007), inter-professional collaboration (Harker et al, 2004); inter-agency working (Warmington et al, 2004) and joint working and strategic alliances (Kennedy et al, 2001).

Another term that requires clarification is ‘participant’. It is used throughout this thesis and refers to the individuals who took part in the interview stage of this study. The term ‘third sector organisation’ (TSO) is used when wishing to include the broad range of ‘not-for-profit groups. The term ‘voluntary and community organisation/sector’ (VCO/VCS) will be used for a specific focus on Voluntary Community Organisations (VCOs): “Non-governmental, value-driven – primarily motivated by the desire to further social, environmental or cultural objectives rather than profit making” (Office of the Third Sector, 2006).

The terms ‘organisation’ and ‘agencies’ are used interchangeably and are used to represent groups of individuals who operate together under a formal constitutional or legal framework, irrespective of their size. The term ‘practice’ is used to denote the various activities that the organisations, who are represented in this study, undertake. These include learning and skills training in numeracy, literacy, language and business skills.

1.6 Summary

This chapter has presented an account of the overall line of argument and introduced the main purpose of this study. It has provided the background to this research by providing the context for partnership-working involving voluntary and community agencies and adult learning and skills provision. It has also justified the need for this research in terms of perceived ‘gaps’ in the literature concerning the perceptions of individuals whose work is

delivered through multi-agency and multi-sector collaborations. This introductory chapter has outlined the research strategy adopted to answer the research questions presented in 1.3. The structure of this thesis has been outlined and the key terms used throughout this thesis have been clarified. The next chapter will explore the key areas which constitute the contextual and theoretical landscape of partnership work and provide the theoretical framework which guides this study.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a direction to this research by providing the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings to this study. They are assembled from some of the research relevant to examining inter-organisational dynamics. There is a large body of research that has been directed towards gaining an understanding of the challenges facing those involved in inter-organisational collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). The previous introductory chapter discussed the context in which this takes place and presented some of the contentions that are associated with it in the literature and in practice. This suggested a complex and multi-layered area of research located within the literature.

This chapter is presented in two sections. The first section (2.1) sets out the detail in relation to the policy context, the conceptualization and proliferation of partnership. The second section (2.2) reviews a range of theoretical perspectives selected for their relevance to the exploration of political and social contexts and how they contribute towards a framework for understanding partnership.

This first section explores the international and national context against which the proliferation of partnership can be better understood (McQuaid, 2000). It presents the broader context against which to understand the historical and global 'landscape' and the motivations for third sector organisations to deliver learning and skills development in collaboration. It locates the attention within the wider European Union, international policy arena before re-focusing attention on the United Kingdom's national, regional and local

policy frameworks. It links the operationalization of ‘partnership’ through the use of concepts and ‘conduits’ between government and TSO/VCOs in the form of infrastructure agencies and legal frameworks.

2.1.1 European public policy

Collaborative activities have become increasingly more prominent and extensive within the sectors of many nations, over the past twenty-five years (Selsky and Parker, 2005). According to O’Brian and O’Fathaigh (2004:5), the European Union has been the key ‘driver’ and the ‘the catalyst’ in the reform of public service delivery and the positioning of the idea of partnership as a vehicle for facilitating changes in the structures, processes and practices of it.

The past two decades have witnessed seismic shifts in the operation of the public sector in industrialised countries; responding to growing dissatisfaction in the delivery of public services (Geddes, 1998; Martin and Sanderson, 1999). European member states are being pressed to develop policies and action plans for community development within the European Union (Selsky and Parker, 2005). This involves prioritising strategies to strengthen civil society and promote social inclusion as a mechanism for engaging with communities viewed as being “at the centre of this changing development” and resulting in a proliferation of partnerships across the European Union (O’Brian and O’Fathaigh, 2004:5).

2.1.2 United Kingdom policy

The notion of different agencies working together for a common objective is not a new one (Ballock and Taylor, 2001). What is new in recent years, is the increase in emphasis that successive governments have placed on organisations to work collaboratively (OTS, 2006) and across ‘sectors’, in order to address problems in society ‘more effectively’ (Alcock, 2010b). Partnership is increasingly being deployed across the political spectrum according to Cardini (2006). It is being viewed more frequently as the norm and central to the previous and current government’s approach, to tackling complex policy issues by delivering services through a range of partnership structures within the United Kingdom (Geddes, 1998). It is also significant in the development of policy according to Boydell and Rugkasa (2007). In the United Kingdom, during the years of the Conservative government in the 1980’s, there was a fragmentation in the delivery of services from a variety of agencies, which resulted in the under-achievement of many local authority services and a general lack of engagement by citizens with what was being offered (Audit Commission, 1998).

By the end of the twentieth century, public service initiatives were claimed to be under-delivering the democratic and inclusive outcomes communities demanded and required of an industrialised country (Glendinning et al, 2002; Darlow et al, 2007). Public policy in the United Kingdom had increasingly acknowledged that:

“decision-making and service delivery can be improved through partnership-working across different sectors and by involving communities in these arrangements” (Gilchrist, 2006).

According to the Audit Commission (1998), organisations who work in partnership were viewed as having the potential to create ‘new organisational structures’ or processes

without fully clarifying what these might be. Whilst infusing 'partnership' with the potential to bring about change, they also expressed concern at the significant growth in partnership activity (Audit Commission, 1998). Gilchrist (2006:75) questions why the previous Labour government was so keen to promote partnership and participation in almost every aspect of government; encouraging local government to work in partnership with statutory bodies but also with the voluntary and community organisations as part of the 'third sector'.

With the Labour government's emphasis on stimulating integrated local action, a wide range of area-based initiatives, requiring local partnerships within communities, were established after 1997 (Boydell and Rugkasa, 2007). This proliferation, in the provision of a number of key areas of education, social care and health (Lacey, 2001), was viewed as increasing evidence of the "burgeoning world of partnership" (Stoker, 2005). Its proliferation raises a number of important questions concerning its heightened position in the rhetoric of public policy over the past twenty years (Gilchrist, 2006). According to Cairns (2009:35), "the drive to bring the voluntary sector closer to government" has gathered pace since the election of the Labour government in 1997. Annexed to this, has been the recognition of the need for a "healthy and vibrant voluntary and community sector" as an important part of strong communities (IDeA, 2006:3).

The ideology behind partnership-working was initiated by the Labour government of 1997 according to Glendinning et al (2002:97). It was part of what they described as: "a democratic renewal and modernising agenda to champion new and different forms of decision-making in public services with a shift from 'democratic' towards 'partnership' and 'participatory decision-making'".

The role that partnership was to play in achieving these objectives was made clear from, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair's positioning of it within the government's rhetoric:

"It is in partnership with others that local governments' future lies" (Blair, 1998:13).

Soon after Labour came to power in 1997, partnership-working was viewed as "a potentially powerful tool for tackling difficult policy and operational problems faced by local agencies" and a "productive way of achieving more efficient and effective use of scarce resources" (Audit Commission, 1998:5). However, by 2005 the Audit Commission were expressing their concerns and identified that the pragmatics of working across different organizational boundaries, had the potential to not only increase complexity and precipitate ambiguity, but to generate confusion and weaken accountability (Audit Commission, 2005:2). This represented a significant departure, only seven years later, from their earlier claims and aspirations for partnership as having the potential to create new organizational structures and processes (Audit Commission, 1998).

Yet, despite these cautions, the drive for partnership has continued largely uncontested (Glasby et al, 2011). The policy context for partnership-working, within the United Kingdom, can be viewed as being driven by the policy landscape of government; a well-documented approach of the previous Labour government to addressing long-term and embedded social problems (Martin and Sanderson, 1999; Barnes et al, 2005). Many welfare programmes, devised to tackle seemingly not easily controlled or directed problems, are invariably reliant on partnership approaches involving multicultural representation (Dowling et al, 2004) and community collaboration (Barnes et al, 2005). The concept of partnership has, therefore, become central to the United Kingdom's government approach to tackling complex issues (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

The drive for “joined-up central and local government” became a central theme in Labour’s modernization agenda, commencing in 1997 (Darlow et al, 2007). Initiatives, such as Labour’s urban regeneration policies, positioned partnerships as a requirement for accessing funding (Carley et al, 2000). Unfortunately, this sent an unambiguous message that “partnership is no longer simply an option, it is a requirement” (Dowling et al, 2004). Whilst it appears from the literature, that partnership presents opportunities for sharing knowledge and pooling resources, it also presents challenges in terms of conflicting agendas, different expectations and difficulties in communication and accountabilities (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). The significant pressures being exerted by the economic budgetary constraints, exacerbated by the 2007/8 economic downturn, may result in the long ‘lens’ of history judging “the New Labour era to have been a high water mark in partnership between the state and the sector” (Alcock, 2010b:15). However, whilst a change in government in 2010 appeared to draw some distinction between the changes of terminology, it still turned its attention to the third sector.

McLaughlin (2004) explored the representation of partnership in British social policy; suggesting that the force of the rhetoric associated with it, represented another metaphor for social control and that more research and greater critical analysis was required. Other authors see the results, of the proliferation of partnerships, as an increase in the integration of a range of services into agency networks of delivery and an expansion of the nature and number of organisations able to provide services (Schultze and Wirth, 1996). Local authorities have long been working together across administrative boundaries but these partnerships are increasingly becoming more formalized (Hudson et al, 1999; HM Treasury, 2002).

The government encouraged local government to work in partnership with local communities and other agencies in flexible partnerships and introduced a number of measures to make it easier to do so (HM Treasury, 2006). The government's 'Public Service Agreement Framework' and 'Local Government Performance Framework' aimed to engage TSOs in the delivery of a wide range of services; including learning and skills development (LSC, 2003). Local Area Agreements (LAAs) were initiated in order to deliver the strategies that local strategic partnerships had identified and prioritized for their communities (Osborne, 1999). They define priorities for local areas and are negotiated by central government and local partners (Osborne, 2000). In practice, this means that Local Authorities are delivering national outcomes that also reflect local priorities. Other, more recent, local government initiatives are Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs). They are similar in principle to the LAAs but enable local government to 'transcend' administrative boundaries to work in collaboration together (Stoker, 2005).

Amongst the ideas behind these initiatives, was to allow more contracting out of services to voluntary sector organisations as it was felt that they had a more detailed understanding of the issues in the areas they were located in and the needs of learners (DETR, 1998). This was viewed as a significant contrast to the way in which local government had previously been seen to be operating (Wilkinson and Craig, 2002). However, there was the tendency for local government to treat and engage with communities as if they were homogenous, single entities and representative of the public in general (Newman, 2002:11).

In the United Kingdom, partnership-working is considered to deliver more effective, rationalised and integrated services that benefit; not only those who use them but the professionals who deliver them (Bloxham, 1997). It has become central to the government's approach to tackling a range of complex policy issues (Boydell and Rugkasa

2007). It is also assumed that collaborative delivery results in a wider range of services being on offer within a community (Tait and Shah, 2007). However, collaborative activities, which draw individuals to work together, are based on the assumption that they will achieve individual and shared outcomes that meet the needs of all partners (Tennyson, 1998; Sullivan et al, 2002). Building initiatives through a diverse, multi-agency approach often requires protracted timeframes and a significant investment of human and physical resources (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). According to Waddell and Brown (1997), it is the degree of difference between partners which influences the amount of time and effort required to build and sustain these relationships. Between similar organisations, these differences may be less distinctive but Waddell and Brown (1997:3) caution that partnerships between different sector organisations “require substantial effort because partners are quite different in terms of culture, goals, power, and history”.

Whilst working in partnership can bring gains such as a raised profile within the community (Shaw, 2004:41), this can be contrasted with the challenges to the very notion of partnership as empowering participants in a process of power-sharing through collaborative working practices (Bills and Glennerster, 1998; Cornwall, 2004). Meade and O'Donovan (2002:1) refer to the continuous assent of partnerships as part of a deliberate agenda to restrict the demands of organisations to operate within their own structures. Many sources of funding are only available to the sector if they are able to demonstrate that delivery will be through partnership-working arrangements; it is often not an option but a requirement from statutory funders (IVAR, 2011). The barriers and obstacles identified in the Improvement and Development Agency's PIP pilot study revealed that the difficulties and complexities of cross-sector, multi-agency partnership-working are often shaped by local circumstances and local relationships (IDeA, 2006:3).

2.1.3 Governance as ‘self-organising, inter-organisational networks’

The literature suggests that the relationship with government dominates discourses about the future of the voluntary sector (Lewis, 1999) and is suggestive of a number of contending discourses on ‘partnership’ (Cardini, 2006). One such narrative is that of ‘governance’: a term that refers to the way organisations and institutions are governed or should be governed (Newman, 2001:16).

‘Governance’ has become “the defining narrative of British government at the heart of the new century” (Rhodes, 1997) and is a term increasingly deployed in the area of social policy; signifying a change in the understanding of governing processes (Newman 2001:11). The past three decades have witnessed many parts of the world changing the structures and practices of their commercial, public and third sector organisations; resulting in a considerable interest in ‘governance’ (Klijn, 2008). Partnership was one of the key routes by which the Labour government sought to reform the welfare state; positioning it significantly within their 1997 election manifesto (Powell, 1996; Powell and Dowling, 2006). According to Rhodes (1997:15), the term ‘governance’ can be defined as, “self-organising, inter-organisational networks characterised by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state.”

The term partnership appears in the academic and policy literature as a concept applied to a variety of ways of organizing different activities (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002:1). Fairclough (2003) views partnerships as extensions of the government and views the danger of ‘partnership governance’ being viewed as constructing the idea that all interested parties are included and can participate. For some critical observers, this represents collaborative governance, and it is felt that this shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ has been at the expense of the democratic underpinning of local government (Wilkinson

and Craig, 2002). Many academics have argued that western populations are largely governed “at a distance” (Rose, 1999) through the operationalisation of partnerships. Other critics describe ‘partnership’ as constituting a new language that could be termed ‘public governance’ (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002:1).

2.1.4 Conceptualising partnership and partnership-working

As a concept, the numerous definitions of partnership are therefore based on different theoretical assumptions (Warmington et al, 2004). The impact of this is often insufficient rigor being employed to its meaning and the terms being seen as synonymous or interchangeable across a range of contexts (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Hudson et al, 1999). Other terms are also used to infer a similar ideology, such as ‘multi-organisational partnership’, ‘collaborative partnership’, ‘inter-organisational relationship’, ‘network’, ‘cross-sector collaboration’ or ‘alliance’ (Hudson et al, 1999). The range of terminology used to describe partnership working also includes ‘collaboration’, ‘cooperation’, and ‘joint-working’ (Ling, 2000). The term ‘collaboration’ or ‘collaborative’ is used to emphasise the notion of ‘collaboration’ as:

“the commitment of organizational resources to an initiative involving two or more entities that come together out of recognition that they cannot resolve problems or accomplish their missions alone” (Snaveley and Tracy, 2003).

However, there are differences of opinion as to whether there are subtle differences between these terms or whether they can be used interchangeably to express the same structure (Dowling et al, 2004). The literature suggests that partnership is thought, by some theorists, to be “such an elusive term that it lacks any real meaning” (Diamond, 2006).

Whilst others, suggest that it creates confusion around it because it lacks any clear definition (Wildridge et al, 2004). The literature also suggests that there is no single definition or standard usage of the term ‘partnership’ or ‘partnership-working’ and “no agreement as to what partnership means” (Brinkerhoff, 2002). This situation is further complicated by the fact that it is attributed with a diversity of meanings and is used to refer to a wide range of working relationships and “lays claim to no single definition or model” (Ballock and Taylor, 2001:6). According to Hutchinson and Campbell (1998), the term ‘partnership’ is so highly ‘polarised’ that it defies being conceptualised by a single definition. Tennyson (1998:7) provides a generic description which suggests that, not only are the benefits of partnership shared, but so too are the risks and that the alliance ought to be subject to an iterative cycle of evaluation. He describes the notion of ‘partnership’ as:

“a cross-sector alliance in which individuals, groups or organisations agree to work together to fulfill an obligation or undertake a specific task; share the risk as well as the benefits and review the relationship regularly, revising their agreement as necessary” (Tennyson , 1998:7).

In their definition of ‘partnership’, the Audit Commission highlighted the independence of the ‘partners’ and suggested that new structures, or processes, may be created out of working in partnership. The Audit Commission’s (1998) defines partnership as:

“A joint working arrangement where partners are otherwise independent bodies; cooperating to achieve a common goal; this may involve the creation of new organisational structures or processes to plan and implement a joint programme as well as sharing relevant information, risks and rewards.”

What is clear from the literature, is that whichever term is used, it can mean different things to different people under different circumstances (Glendinning, 2002a). It can represent a “variety of arrangements with different purposes, timescales, structures, operating procedures and members” (Lowndes, 2001). Whilst there is not an agreed definition, similarities exist between the different definitions offered for partnerships (Wildridge et al, 2004). Therefore, it is not surprising that it has been described as a “terminological quagmire” (Lloyd, et al 2001). The existing literature fails to present a clear definition of what a partnership is and the lack of distinctness between; often interchangeable and synonymous terms such as collaboration, alliance and network, suggests differences in the theoretical perspectives that lead to their deployment (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Hudson et al, 1999). The implications of these linguistic differences will be addressed in section 2.2, where different theoretical approaches to partnership will be explored.

2.1.5 Conceptualising a sector

As with the definition of partnership, there is considerable debate around defining the diverse and complex composition of the voluntary and community sector (Alcock, 2010a). There are several terms used to describe organisations which are not part of the government and are not for private profit: ‘third sector’, ‘voluntary sector’, ‘community sector’, ‘voluntary and community sector’ (Anheier, 2000; Arvidson, 2009). The VCS is described in multiple terms, including ‘the not-for-profit sector’ and the ‘third sector’ (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). According to Alcock (2010b), “The third sector is a hugely contested terrain. This includes whether there is a coherent ‘sector’ at all”. The Coalition government and the previous Labour government, both prefer the term ‘third sector’ to refer to the diverse array of social enterprises, charities, voluntary and community

organisations, mutuals and co-operatives which comprise the ‘not-for-profit sector (ERSC, 2009). Whilst there is, like the term ‘partnership’, no universally agreed definition of the term ‘third sector’, organisations are expected to be value-led and to operate for public benefit with each synonym coming with values attached (Compact, 2009:3).

2.1.6 Public policy context for voluntary and community sector

Whilst the voluntary and community sector has a long history of working with different agencies, it has not been to the levels of frequency that we now witness (Ballock and Taylor, 2001). The importance ascribed to collaborative partnership arrangements was viewed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency as “essential for the successful implementation of major government policy initiatives to increase and improve adult learning and skills” (Watters, 2005). The impetus for the previous Labour government to forge a closer relationship between the voluntary and community sector was highlighted in the government’s pledge to:

“work with national third sector umbrella bodies to establish a standard by which local third sector bodies should organise themselves to be effectively represented on LSP’s [Local Strategic Partnerships]” (HM Treasury, 2006).

The previous Labour government’s commitment towards the voluntary and community sector, or their then preferred term ‘third sector’, in “the reform of public service and reinvigoration of public life” (HM Treasury, 2002:3), was unambiguous in its rhetoric. This was highlighted by the use of phrases which emphasised the need to “build a new partnership using the sector’s strengths” and to “give greater voice to the sector’s work” (HM Treasury, 2002:3).

The more prolific use of the term 'third sector' dates from the establishment of the previous Labour government's 'Office of the Third Sector' (OTS) in 2006 and whilst it is a concept developed by that government, it was not initiated originally by them (Alcock, 2010a). More than thirty years earlier, Etzioni (1973) formulated the concept of a 'third sector' and referred to: "a third alternative, indeed sector, between the state and the market". He described them being populated by organisations that are able to combine the entrepreneurial spirit and organisational effectiveness of the business firm with the common good orientation of the state and its public administration (Etzioni, 1973:314). This display of 'capacity', encompassing skills, knowledge and networks, was referred to as "organisations of the future" (Etzioni, 1973:318). The Compact (2009) refers to 'third sector' as a term which the Labour government adopted to describe "voluntary and community organisations, charities, faith groups, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals, both large and small".

According to Buckingham (2009), the 1970's witnessed the voluntary and community sector (VCS) playing a more prominent role in delivering public services due to the "renewed emphasis on welfare pluralism in the UK". There is a long and complex history between the 'state' and the voluntary and community sector (VCS), which stretches back to the last century (Etherington, 2002). Between 2000 and 2010 there was an explosion of interest in policy associated with the voluntary and community sector with the focus on organisations as "providers of public services and as agents of social and democratic renewal" (IVAR, 2011:8). This interest was further cemented with the introduction, in 2006, of the 'The Charities Bill' by the Labour government. This allowed the breadth of TSOs to work more closely in partnership with government institutions (Carley et al, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2002). However, what it also did was to increase the regulatory framework that charities had to adhere to in order to secure funding (Audit Commission, 2005). Many

VCOs combine more than one function as part of their service and are often dependent on public funding, through an array of contractual arrangements with local authorities, in order to be able to deliver their services (Compact Partnership, 2009). There is little wonder that organisations may question the notion of whether they are truly independent (Cairns, 2009).

One of the primary social, economic and welfare policy themes of the United Kingdom government since 1997 (Labour Party, 1997; Lewis, 1999), has been to expand the base of service providers. Etzioni (1973) referred to this expanded provision as “organisations of the future” (1973) over thirty years earlier. According to Anheier (2000), acknowledgement of the “primacy of the welfare market is an implicit value judgement” and one not necessarily shared by the voluntary and community sector. This raises an important issue concerning what the implications are if the values of the voluntary and community sector - the ‘third sector’ - do not coincide (Roberts, 2007). If there was any doubt concerning the Labour government’s view of where they saw the location of a ‘third sector’, the following quotation must certainly have dispelled it:

“We believe that voluntary and community sector organisations have a crucial role to play in the reform of the public service and reinvigoration of civic life”

(HM Treasury, 2002:3).

Cairns (2009:35) described this sentiment as “the drive to bring the voluntary sector closer to government”. The increasing use of the phrase ‘third sector’ is viewed as problematic as it suggests “a third alternative between state and the market”; suggesting a clear distinction between them (Alcock, 2010b). Other commentators view the concept of a ‘third sector’ as a “loose and baggy monster” (Kendall and Knapp, 1995:66); a reference to its perceived quality of being ‘moulded’ to suit different purposes.

2.1.7 The Compact: a legal framework for collaboration

Despite the voluntary and community sector having a history of delivering services and addressing problems at a community level, many organisations have been experiencing substantial difficulties in achieving their objectives through working in partnership. Two important reports, 'The Deakin Commission Report' (1996) and 'Building The Future Together' (Labour Party, 1997), called for a framework to establish ground rules between the government and 'third sector'. The Deakin Commission Report (1996) concluded, that the Labour government ought to recognize the legitimacy of the voluntary and community sectors diverse roles and responsibility and help to promote a healthy sector (Deakin, 1996). These two reports provided the impetus to create an agreement in 1998 known as 'The Compact' (Compact, 2009). This is a national agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector - now referred to as the third sector in England – but it does not have legal status (Compact, 2009). It sets out the principles which guide this relationship and the commitments to improve the way in which the government and the 'third sector' work together for the benefit of communities and citizens (Compact, 2009). It was developed further from the recommendations made by the government's report (HM Treasury, 2002) which recognized the complexity of the relationship between the government and the broader range of not-for-profit organisations which are said to comprise a 'third sector'. Furthermore, it identified a number of issues and challenges that precipitated problems that underpinned this way of working:

“The Compact grew out of recognition that managing the relationship between the government and the third sector is complex. At the root of this complexity are a series of dilemmas that the government and the sector often face.”

(Compact, June 2009:5)

The Compact aimed to create “a new approach to partnership between Government and the voluntary and community sector” (Straw and Stowe, 1998). Both HM Treasury’s 2002 and the Home Office’s 2004 reviews expressed interest in being able to witness improvements in the relationship between local government and voluntary and community organisations (IDeA, 2006). One of the key tenets of this agreement was the independence of the third sector. This national agreement commits the government and local public sector agencies to:

“recognise and support the independence of the sector; including its right within the law to campaign, to comment on government policy and to challenge that policy irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist and to determine and manage its own affairs” (Compact, 2009:4).

What was unique about the United Kingdom’s English version of the Compact was the emphasis placed on the Compact’s role in facilitating good relations for the delivery of public services (HM Treasury, 2006c:61). What was identified as a dilemma was the potential challenge to the independence of the third sector that could manifest itself on a daily basis in relationships between the government and third sector organisations (Compact, 2009). Several commentators have expressed that there were few issues as crucial as how to facilitate cooperation with the state in a way that protected the non-profit sector from “surrendering its basic autonomy and thus allows it to function as a true partner with the state and not simply as an ‘agent’ or ‘vendor’” (Salamon and Anheier, 1996b:121).

There has been a significant increase in the role of the ‘third sector’ and its relationship with public bodies since the original Compact was agreed in 1998 (Compact, 2009). Local Area Agreements and third sector compacts have meant that the statutory sector is working

more closely with colleagues in a range of local settings than ever before (Compact Partnership, 2009). As a result, different learning opportunities are possible and learners can gain a wide range of learning and skills development opportunities with organisations that are able to provide different facilities, skills-sets and resources (Watters, 2005). This can precipitate opportunities to engage people in a variety of learning opportunities.

It is now widely recognised that more than a decade on, those organisations who constitute the ‘third sector’ often have multiple roles (Luscher and Lewis, 2008). As well as engaging in independent activity such as campaigning, delivering grant-funded programmes, strengthening local opportunities for participation and active citizenship, the ‘third sector’ also provides a wide range of public services (Compact, 2009). The principles of ‘The Compact’ are also reflected in the local performance frameworks for local authorities and their statutory partners. They provide the mechanism by which the third sector can hold local government to account over the delivery of services. The literature indicates that third sector organisations are involved in a wide range of partnerships with local statutory bodies (Compact, 2009:5).

2.1.8 The growth of infrastructure support

Research has indicated that the way local relationships are developed and maintained has a significant impact on the communities in those areas (OTS, 2006). Some organisations have developed out of voluntary and community organisations and are able to act between the third sector and government; resulting in a unique role and a vested interest in maintaining a healthy relationship with both (Labour Party, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Jupp, 2000).

Over the past two decades there has been a growth in support organisations; many of whom started out as frontline service providers themselves and then gradually took on a support function for smaller groups (Osborne, 1999). The term ‘infrastructure support agency’ is often used to refer to second-tier organisations that support frontline voluntary and community groups (Osborne, 2000). These organisations have become important to many ‘third sector’ organisations as they can provide legal representation and sources of funding and training (Compact, 2009). Several regions within the United Kingdom are represented by their own regional infrastructure support organisation. It is a model which is viewed as a generally self-selecting, specialist group with the interests of voluntary and community agencies at the centre of its focus and sees itself as the natural provider to the local community; a position it seeks to expand and protect (Osborne, 2000; Compact, 2009).

However, whilst many may view themselves as the ‘natural provider’ for the ‘third sector’, they are not without their critics. The relationship of central government partnerships with national infrastructure agencies, heralds in the changing role of the infrastructure organisation; positioning them as:

“a conduit between the local public sector and civil society in decision-making, designing and delivering services and supporting the voice of people who use services” (Cabinet Office, 2010a).

Their development and funding bears closer scrutiny and brings into question their autonomy and independence; especially at a time when the organisations they represent are witnessing challenges to their own independence (Cairns, 2009). A closer examination of The ‘Office for Civil Society Strategic Partners Grant Programme’, which began in 2006 and ended in March 2011, revealed that they funded the core costs of forty-two national

infrastructure support organisations. With the change of government in 2010, the new ‘Office for Civil Society’, announced that from March 2011 it was going to “cut its budget for its strategic partners from £12.2m to £7.5 and the number of partners from 42 to 15” (Cabinet Office, 2010c). The Office for Civil Society intended to commission a new strategic partner programme and clearly indicated that a key funding criteria for any new initiative, may include the ability of an organisation to: “represent a part of the sector or the sector as a whole, in helping shape government policy”. It further added that it must also “help to deliver the vision for the Big Society, including the three priorities for civil society” (Cabinet Office, 2010c:11).

This made it clear that the condition on which an infrastructure support agency was itself to receive its core funding, was by acting as an agent between the government and the third sector. There can be little doubt, from these two comments, that the Coalition Government, who came to power in May 2010, viewed infrastructure support agencies as being a ‘conduit’ between the government and the ‘third sector’. They went on to stress that they viewed these organisations as having “a valuable role to play; not least in strengthening local networks” (Cabinet Office, 2010c:7): a further indication of the role they envisioned for them. On the 18th May 2010, the new Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government’s Prime Minister, David Cameron and the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, outlined their policy plans for the third sector. They placed the notion of ‘The Big Society’ at the heart of their public sector reform:

“Together with citizens and communities, the voluntary and community sector sits at the heart of the Government’s ambitions to create a Big Society”
(Cabinet Office, 2010a:3).

The Cabinet Office (2010a) made a commitment to move from 'big government' to 'big society' by reducing control from central government and giving greater local control. The details of how this was to be achieved in practice were not included in the document. With the new Coalition Government in place, the 'Office of the Third Sector', under the previous Labour Government, was rebranded as the 'Office for Civil Society'. The current Prime Minister, David Cameron, stated that the Government and the voluntary and community sector shared a common objective to building a stronger society and to improving the lives of citizens: "The Big Society agenda is not a Government programme, it is a call to action" (Cabinet Office, 2010b). He further suggested that civil society organizations (charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups) will need to embrace new skills, partnerships and organizational models if they are to seize the opportunities that lie ahead (Cabinet Office, 2010b). This rhetoric is further underpinned with a specific reference to the importance for organisations to improve their business skills, become more entrepreneurial and to strengthen their governance (Cabinet Office, 2010d:6).

According to the Cabinet Office's voluntary sector website page in 2010, "The office aims to advocate the third sector and coordinate sector-related work across government". This was further underpinned by the publishing of the Coalition's 'Building the Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010c) and outlined in a speech by Francis Maud, the 'Minister for the Third Sector'. He made it clear that third sector policy was to be a priority for government (Alcock, 2010b). This suggests that the Coalition Government's position is one of continuing with the development of the idea of voluntary and community organisations - third sector organisations - "to deliver services through the mechanisms of contracting and the welfare market" (Roberts, 2007). This was a sentiment mirrored in the 'Briefing on The Big Society' in June 2010, when the National Council for Voluntary Organisations

(NCVO) welcomed the “increased role of the VCS in public service delivery in light of the announced cuts to public spending” (NCVO, 2010, 4:4.13).

These changes precipitate challenges for organisations. They are further magnified by budgetary constraints and the contraction of public funding under the Coalition Government’s fiscal tightening policies. The changing economic landscape; not a stranger even in the ‘good times’ for many voluntary and community organisations, is now exerting an even greater pressure (Coffield, 2008). This may see some of them having to make changes to their organizational objectives in order to operate within the new policy landscape of public service delivery (Barnes et al, 2005). Given the estimated size of ‘the sector’ to be in excess of 870,000 organisations (NCVO, 2009), the delivery capacity potential for service delivery is considerable; a potential which has not gone unnoticed amongst policy-makers (Craig et al, 2004). Examining the policy landscape that relates to third sector delivery and the role that partnership working plays in delivering public services, has demonstrated that despite the considerable changes to and reductions in the opportunities for many third sector organisations to access funding, there is an expectation that the voluntary sector role in partnership delivery arrangements will increase.

The next section examines a range of theoretical perspectives and models for their suitability for understanding the complex conceptual domain that has been presented in this first section.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives relevant to examining partnership

The literature, explored in the previous section, has highlighted a number of dynamics that have emerged from an exploration of the context of collaborative partnership. These have

been around uncertainty in the funding environment, shared resources, public sector reform, trust, power and social relationships. The literature review suggested that the external environment; including public policy, funding and a variable political context, shapes the conceptualisations of partnership and affects the practice of collaborative partnership-working. This section will explore a number of theoretical perspectives and examines their potential to provide more meaning to these practices.

2.2.1 Discourse as a constituent of creating and shaping narratives

The literature suggests that the discourse of power is central to the exploration of the arguments around partnership, and that existing relationships have changed little over time in terms of the balance of power residing within them (Cornwall, 2004:80). Collaboration processes may fail for various reasons. One of the main reasons for failure relates to issues of unequal power division (Gray, 2003). According to Pimbert (2001:82), globalisation causes power differentials where a small minority of economic actors exert significant control over markets, technologies, policies and institutions and ensure that any benefits are concentrated within their control and not equitably distributed.

Some theorists believe that it is naïve to expect that consensus can be attained meaningfully with a group of stakeholders where power is unequally distributed (Sullivan et al, 2002). According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), the discourse of collaborative partnership working constitutes, and sustains, unequal power relations by using “a number of contending discourses on partnership” (Lewis, 1999). Fairclough (2003) suggests that there is much to support the argument that dominant stakeholders in partnerships are using discursual practices to link civil society to the ‘state’ by focusing on increasing levels of collaboration between the private and the public sector to deliver a wide range of services

and efficiencies. As many partnerships now tend to be formed within existing structures, processes and frameworks, it has been suggested that this gives rise to “new rhetoric poured into old bottles” (Craig and Taylor, 2002: 134).

According to Foucault (1972, 1980), in order to understand how rhetoric operates in practice ‘to construct knowledge, identities, power and social relations in partnerships’, it is important to appreciate that ‘language and discourse construct, regulate and control knowledge’ and ‘institutions are not transparent nor neutral means for describing the world’. Wittgenstein (1953:569) described language as an ‘instrument’ and its concepts as instruments. As discourse comprises the fabric of what is written, spoken or symbolized, it implies that nothing can be taken as accounts of the truth and meanings can be created, changed and emergent discourses can exert a significant impact on how social phenomena are perceived (Foucault, 1972, 1980). It is for these reasons that it is necessary to explore the theoretical assumptions related to the creation of meaning and the initialisation of practices around partnership and third sector organisations.

Social scientists have increasingly displayed an interest in exploring the discourse of partnership (Cobb and Rubin, 2006). The analysis of discourse enables the close study of language in use and searching for patterns in the way language is used, reveals much about how ideas are perpetuated and modified and the devices which operate and orientate it (Cobb and Rubin, 2006). One of the fundamental assumptions of the analysis of discourse is the idea that language is not transparent; creating challenges for the analyst (Taylor, 2001:6). Analysis of institutional discourses - written, spoken and enacted - can provide insights for practitioners and policy-makers into how they operate in practice and how these practices either contribute to, or detract from, desired outcomes for policy and practice (Foucault, 1972,1980).

At a community level, partnering with external agencies can reinforce inequalities when they remain as “simply pseudo-democratic instruments through which authorities legitimise already-taken policy decision” (Cornwall, 2004:80). Because public sector cultures are so entrenched, power holders are too often unaware of the linguistic and procedural mechanisms by which they perpetuate unequal power relations (Craig and Taylor, 2002:134). As power relations between partners are closely linked to the resources at their disposal, the relationship is therefore highly dependent on how these resources are valued by the respective partners, and where the ownership lies.

2.2.2 Structuration Theory

Structuration theory focuses on the connections between human action and the structuring of activities and social structures (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). Conceptually, it refers to the patterns that are manifested by the regularities and processes that people use (Ranson, et al, 1980:1) and the use of resources and rules in their interactions (Riley, 1983:415). According to Giddens (1979, 1984), individuals and society should be reconceptualised as the duality of agency and structure. Riley (1983) presents a system level of analysis that can present a useful tool for framing and structuring the examination of complex phenomenon such as inter-organisational activity that spans a wide spectrum of social structures. Table 2.2 summarises these:

Table 1. Structuration framing (Riley, 1983)

Choices	Optional approaches
System level of analysis	Global National Regional Institutional Individual (Micro)
Structural focus (hierarchy)	Related structures Diverse structures
Framing (boundary)	Structure view: influence of structure on action Actor view: actor's structural moves Alternating: structure and actor views
Dynamics (pragmatics)	System change System stability
Stance	Positive Skeptical Critical

2.2.3 Minimal structures framework

Kamoche and Cunha (2001) developed their concept of minimal structures and argued that they were needed as a template within which innovation can take place. They originally developed it for the context of product development with two minimal structures: social and technical. However, van der Meer-Kooistra and Scapens (2008) developed a more general framework to include four minimal structures: social, technical, economic and institutional. It has merit as a framework through which to view collaborative partnership working activities as the minimal structures framework of van der Meer-Kooistra and Scapens (2008) provides useful insights into both internal organizational elements and external governmental regulatory mechanisms. It also addresses elements that can change over time, such as trust. The social structures element identifies that trust is an essential element in the governance of lateral relationships and suggests that:

“trust can be built where the governance of these relationships provides sufficient structure to mitigate the risks which are involved in co-operation between independent parties who may have different motives and interests, while at the same time allowing individual capabilities and knowledge to be exploited for the mutual benefit of all the parties” (van der Meer-Kooistra and Scapens, 2008:375).

Minimal structures can provide “flexibility within a structure; i.e. firmness in the sense of having a predetermined structure, and flexibility in the nature of work within that structure” (Tatikonda and Rosenthal, 2000:417). As a template for examining collaborative activity, it can provide a theoretical small ‘scaffold’ through which to construct and examine relationships between structures.

According to Holmqvist (1999), inter-organisational learning can be conceptualized as social production and reproduction of inter-organisational rules that leads to changed organizational behavior. Butcher et al. (2011) distinguishes between “transactional partnerships” and “transformational partnerships”. Transactional partnerships are based on the achievement of individual or institutional interests through exchange processes. However, both parts, which benefit from the interchange, are likely to remain fundamentally unchanged (Butcher et al, 2011). In contrast, a transformation partnership has multiple dimensions including ideological, ethical, institutional and social dimensions in which all the partners pursue common actions and goals as they use their capabilities and assets to tackle complex social issues (Strier, 2011). The potential for there to be different outcomes as a consequence, in terms of organizational activity and inter-organisational relationships bears, closer scrutiny.

2.2.4 Institutional Theory and the importance of context

Institutional theory has been utilized within organizational studies in order to explain why organisations, who work closer together, demonstrate similar forms of behavior. This makes the examination of institutional theory relevant to this study with its focus on collaborative activities. There are various form of institutional theory, but what they share in common is a consideration of social structures – rules, norms and routines - and the significance that context has on the processes that institutions implement (Lowndes, 1996). This suggests that in order for organisations to survive, they must adapt to the rules, norms and routines that are prevalent within the environments they operate in (Scott, 1995). What is also of relevance is what theorists describe as ‘institutional isomorphism’. Three types are identified in the literature (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991a). Firstly, ‘coercive isomorphism’ which emanates from the influences of politics and is associated with the problem of legitimacy. Secondly, there is ‘mimetic isomorphism’ which results from responses from institutions to uncertainty. Thirdly, there is ‘normative isomorphism’, which is associated with professionalization of an institution or institutional context. These have relevance with respect to this study as one can shape the other; they are not mutually exclusive of each other (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991a). Institutional theory suggests that collaborative activities between organisations are influenced by the broader environmental economic, political and regulatory pressures that can be precipitated on institutions.

2.2.5 Corporate business and Economic perspectives

According to Bills and Glennerster (1998), there are a number of economic theories that point to the weakness of whole systems: market failure, government failure and voluntary failure. Economic theory provides a way of understanding the motivations behind the

government's interest in influencing the behavior and performance of TSOs (Young, 2000). According to Hansmann (1980), non-profit organisations are chosen by government as vehicles for delivering services in contexts where the for-profit model is not acceptable. This suggests that the perception of TSOs as being more trustworthy because of their non-profit status, is a way for government to mitigate against the idea of 'contract failure' by including TSOs in a wide range of provision. Some of the earliest theories concerning partnership working are from the area of corporate strategy. In the arena of corporate strategy the concept of strategic alliances, and the concept of 'collaborative advantage', are viewed as an alternative business strategy for private enterprises (Johnson and Scholes, 2002).

Whilst TSOs are not-for-profit, they do share many of the same underlying business structures and processes that for-profit organisations have to deal with. Increasingly, many smaller businesses are capitalizing on the benefit of sharing virtual or physical workspaces to reduce operating costs or bulk-buying stock through local collaborative business forums in order to secure cost savings. Resource dependency theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) views organisations as interdependent with their environment. Organisations are viewed as depending for their survival on other organisations and actors for resources. From this perspective, it can be viewed as a means of reducing uncertainty by creating strong and influential links between organisations.

There can be little surprise that TSOs are considering more efficient and effective means of operating their own services. As many TSOs already have a history of collaborative working practices, the idea of working together to lower their business costs, is gaining attention as a business practice (Das and Teng, 2000). Reducing costs is as important for TSOs as for-profit businesses and collaborative working business practices provide the flexibility to be able to realize organizational objectives through working with partners and

lowering collective business costs (Johnson and Scholes, 2002). However, the implications for TSOs may not necessarily be that it is an optional way of working. The literature suggests that it is one that can be forced onto public or government funded agencies, or community-based groups who are dependent upon public finance, through legislation or control of financial resources by central or local government (McQuaid, 2000:24).

Given the increasing uncertainty over funding for many TSOs, the idea of organisations actively seeking out additional collaborative business working arrangements, in order to share resources, facilitate more effective and efficient ways of delivering their services, is not surprising. It is suggested as a highly probable reason that more partnerships, who have shared objectives, can try to gain a competitive advantage in what is an uncertain climate (Foster and Meinhard, 2002). In order to gain efficiencies in terms of the costs associated with running an organisation, Williamson (1975, 1981, 1985, 1991) suggests that some TSOs are actively seeking out partners with whom they can reduce their operating costs; not an altogether new idea. Some TSOs view this embracing of business theory as a necessary step to enable them to develop their service provision and to offer their provision to new areas that they otherwise would not have been able to (Johnson and Scholes, 2002).

According to Strier (2011), the stage in which participants explore power relations between partners may lead to painful questions of trust as they attempt to facilitate closer working relationships. Strier suggests that this is inherently paradoxical, as examining power relations between partners can raise questions of trust which may precipitate internal tensions and conflicts and the potential to precipitate mistrust. Fine and Green (2000) argue that the “influence of economics across social sciences is going to increase, and that the concept of social capital may be an explicit channel for this influence”.

2.2.6 Social capital

Like the term ‘partnership’, social capital has a variety of meanings and is widely cited in political, social and economic studies (Woolcock, 1998). The World Bank (2000b) referred to social capital as “the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions”. It is what Potapchuk et al (1997) describe as the glue that holds a community together. According to Foley and Edwards (1999), by using social capital, we can understand how individuals, groups and societies produce, distribute and use non-economic resources that are essential to profitably manoeuvre within all social constructs.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that social capital exists alongside economic and cultural capital and can be part of a strategy for individuals and groups to reproduce more social capital.

As social capital is part of the process of multi-agency activity, the part of the process of multi-agency activity is social capital. Therefore, an examination of the theoretical perspectives that aim to enhance its significance in collaborative activities between individuals, groups and societies, has relevance to this study. Putnam (1999) believes that social capital investment enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital and demonstrates how non-monetary forms of capital can be powerful and influential. This is a point not lost on many financially impoverished, but human capital rich, not-for-profit organisations. Coleman (1988) argues that the more closed a community is, the greater the development of social capital. It is important to consider it as a theoretical perspective for exploring partnership because it shapes and defines the way social actors interact at all levels in society and it enhances community capacity for local problem-solving (Coleman, 1988). According to Putnam (2000), social capital provides the ‘vital backdrop’ for effective policy by enabling greater community access to political participation

There are two dimensions that are generally thought to represent social capital according to Gittel and Vidal (1998): ‘bonding capital’ and ‘bridging capital’. They describe bonding capital as developing within a group and binding individuals, groups and organisations together. Whilst bridging capital allows a group to reach out and network creatively with other individuals, groups and organisations. Both are highly relevant to the discussion of multi-agency, partnership-working with its increased focus on building new relationship networks. Recent discussions around social capital have focused on the notion of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000) and the notion of ‘strong and loose ties’ (Onyx and Bullen, 2000). In Onyx and Bullen’s review of the literature on social capital, they identified five main themes: shared norms, social agency, reciprocity, networks and trust.

2.2.7 Trust and Risk

Trust is considered fundamental for motivating and driving competitive business advantage (Wicks et al, 1999) and it can have an instrumental role in organizational contexts, such as strategic collaboration and cooperation (Taylor, 1990) and organizational commitment (Yamagishi et al, 1998). According to Evans (2000), social capital consists of resources which are created through the presence of several factors, one of which is high levels of trust. As the organizational environment for third sector activity oscillates between local authorities and business (Walmsley, 2006), then social capital is the ‘connections and trusting contacts’ between them (Das and Teng, 2001).

Like partnership, there are problems with the definition of ‘trust’: lack of clarity in the relationship between risk and trust; confusion between trust and its antecedents and outcomes; lack of specificity of trust leading to confusion in levels of analysis (Mayer et al,

1995). Practitioners who work in partnership associate 'trust' with synonyms such as 'openness', 'honesty', 'respect' and 'avoiding large organisations using power unfairly' (Vangen and Huxham, 1998:4). Confusion about the meaning of trust, and being able to identify when it occurs, makes it difficult to decide what trust is (Clark and Payne, 1997).

Trust can be viewed as a behavioral construct and refers to how one individual interacts with another (Mayer et al, 1995). Behaviour can occur without trust being present but requires other elements such as cooperation (Burt and Knez, 1996) or risk-taking (Sheppard and Sherman, 1998) to produce trust as an outcome. As inter-organisational activity focuses on collaborations, the potential outcomes are trust (Powell, 1996). As trust is subjective, and defined by the experiences of the individual (Kee and Knox, 1970), we formulate our experiences of trust from our feelings, intentions and the thoughts which frame our attitudes (Clark and Payne, 1997). Our attitudes tend to focus on social factors that we evaluate (Anderson, 1996) which in turn are located within social systems (Mayer et al, 1995). As the trustor, our attitudes are directed towards a target which occurs within a setting: the context (Robinson, 1996). As such, trust and levels of trust, can be viewed as how interests are influenced when a trustor, target, and context interact (Robinson, 1996) and can be viewed as a reaction to the dynamics of the situation in which it occurs.

Theorists (Lane, 1998; Hardy et al, 1998) have suggested that there are three broad theoretical explanations of trust: that trust depends on rational calculation and prediction of the benefits accruing to the self and others in collaboration; on shared norms and on shared cognitive understanding and discourse. Other theorists have separated 'trust' into 'competence trust' and 'goodwill trust' (Sako, 1998). Competence trust rests on the calculation of the competence of others and is related to past experiences and the judgement being made that the other person, or organisation, is able to meet their

commitments (Giddens, 1990; Pahl, 2000). ‘Goodwill’ trust can be thought of as developing from the experiences and ‘moral reputation’ of working together. However, it takes the form of accepting vulnerability; based on an assumption of shared, or to some extent, overlapping, values and goals.

Trust consists of acceptance of risk and vulnerability deriving from the action of others and an expectation that the other will not exploit this vulnerability (Luhmann, 1988). Trust is fragile and can be destroyed in a moment but takes a long time to develop (Lane, 1998). Building trust and facilitating positive interpersonal relationships are central to building effective partnerships (Audit Commission, 1998, Shaw, 2008). However, the bureaucratic and contractually-focused environment of partnership has the potential to undermine the development of trusting relationships (McMurray, 2007). Huxham and Vangen (2000) argue that the structures that encompass partnerships are in themselves often “complex and ambiguous both in membership and status”.

There are two forms of risk that are relevant to discussing partnership-working: ‘performance risk’ and ‘relational risk’. According to De Man and Roijackers (2009), ‘performance risk’ is where the focus on risk is whether or not the partnership and/or partners will deliver what is expected of them whilst ‘relational risk’ focuses on whether partners will deceive each other in some way.

The concept of risk is viewed as pivotal to the notion of trust as the act of trusting rests on assuming that a partner will accept the risk and the vulnerability associated with it (Das and Teng, 1998a). Numerous authors have recognized the importance of risk to the understanding of trust but there is no consensus on its relationship with trust (Coleman, 1990; Luhmann, 1988; Schlenker et al, 1973). For some commentators, the idea of trust

implies taking a risk (Lewis and Weigert, 1985) and can be viewed as a mechanism to reduce the risk inherent in opportunistic behavior (Lane and Bachmann, 1996). However, trust can lead to risk-taking and, in turn, risk-taking can impact trust (Das and Teng, 1998b). Collaborative activities are viewed as being particularly at risk (Butler, 1995) but there is the potential for trust to increase through a cycle of learning (Gill et al, 2005).

2.2.8 New Public Management

New Public Management (NPM) has been inspired by a variety of theoretical perspectives according to Gruening (2001): public-choice theory, management theory, classical public administration, policy analysis, principal-agent theory, transaction-cost economics and property-right theory. It has become the dominant paradigm for the management of public services (McLaughlin et al, 2002:1). NPM has been variously described by commentators; there is a degree of overlap between them but the majority of them associate NPM with seven dimensions of change (Hood and Jackson, 1991). These are: a shift towards disaggregation of public organisations into separately managed units; greater competition; increased use of management practices; less costly ways to deliver public services; hands on management; explicit and measurable standards of performance and attempts to control public organisations according to output measures. According to Aucoin (1990:134), there has been a new emphasis on the organisational designs for public management which parallels the internationalization of public and private sector economies. NPM has been referred to as a new “global paradigm” (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992:322-330).

2.2.9 Organisational paradox theory

Another theoretical perspective which has the potential to contribute towards a deeper understanding of inter-organisational working is 'paradox theory'. Partnerships are complex organisations characterized intermittently by both conflict and collaboration (Strier, 2011). The presence of conflict and collaboration in the building of partnerships, can be viewed as a paradox in itself: the simultaneous presence of seemingly mutually exclusive elements (Luscher et al, 2006). Smith and Lewis (2011:382) highlight two components of paradox. The first is the underlying tension of "elements that seem logical, individually, but inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed". The second are "the responses that embrace tensions simultaneously".

The concept of paradox has been playing an increasing role in organisational studies literature (Lewis, 2000). Paradox is defined as something that involves contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that are present and operate equally at the same time (Quinn and Cameron, 1988). According to Luscher et al (2006), there are three types of paradox: belonging (clashing but complementary identities); performing (role conflict and cooperation) and organizing (divergent and convergent organizational sub-cultures). Many theories and ways of thinking about the dynamics that underpin organisations working together, do not match the complexity of the realities that many face (Morgan, 1986:339). Taken together, multiple theoretical perspectives can be helpful in highlighting some of the important ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes that non-profit organisations can face. In his study, Morgan (1986:339) argued that in order to more fully understand these complexities, it is necessary to take a multi-paradigm or perspective approach in order to "understand and grasp the multiple meanings of situations and to confront and manage contradiction and paradox, rather than pretend they do not exist." A paradox perspective

offers a promising approach to contributing towards a theoretical framework for examining partnership.

2.3 Chapter Summary

This broad sweep of the literature has encompassed an exploration of policy fields, public service reform and behavioral, organizational and societal theoretical perspectives. In order to examine collaborative partnership-working further, a multi-lensed approach is more appropriate as a theoretical framework for this study. This provides the ‘underpinning’ to this thesis. The next two chapters will explain how the personal perspectives of this study’s respondents were collected through interviews and aligned with the conceptual and theoretical framework presented in this chapter.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This is the first of two chapters which address the research methodology and methods of this research. This chapter outlines and justifies the research methodology for this study. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section (3.1) provides an overview of the structure of the study: its methodology and approach. It explains the role of theory development and provides the timescale within which this study took place. The second section (3.2) addresses methodological considerations, presents the paradigm, the research questions and explains my position as the researcher. Chapter four presents the methods of data collection, the analysis and addresses quality and ethical considerations.

3.1.1 Theory development and the link to the research questions

As has been stated in the introductory chapter to this study, one of the aims of this research is to make a valuable contribution to the existing corpus of academic literature. The objective is to provide a theoretical framework and model of partnership that contributes towards a clearer understanding of the nature of partnership involving voluntary and community agencies in the delivery of learning and skills provision.

Whilst this study started as close to what Eisenhardt (1989b) described as the “ideal of no theory under consideration and no hypothesis to test”, this resulted in little understanding of the relationship between theories as only a few tenuous strands were present at the outset of this research. The formulation of the research questions; themselves the result of

an iterative process, are by their nature the result of some understanding of the topic. Straus (1987:253) suggested that it is difficult to ignore the theory that has built up in the researcher's mind before the start of the process of researching. This study makes a case for the adoption of a hybridised approach to theory-building. It aims to contribute towards theory-building by the creation of models in order to communicate it. According to Yin (1994), a qualitative methodology is suitable for this purpose.

The research questions are the outcome of a process that was influenced by an initial sweep of the literature prior to the start of this research study, and conversations with colleagues prior to the commencement of it. The final formulation of them has been the result of the moving back and forth through the literature and identifying elements and examining their relevance to VCOs. The research questions are theoretical formulations which have arisen from my conceptions and interpretations of the social reality as I understand it.

The main research question for this study asks:

How does the experience of delivering learning and skills development in partnerships with other organisations affect voluntary and community organisations?

It is underpinned by three research aims which form the three subsidiary research questions of this study. They are:

- to identify the issues and challenges facing voluntary and community organisations who work in partnership
- to identify how the professional practices of individuals who work in voluntary and community organisations are affected by the key factors identified

- to establish how knowledge of issues and challenges of working in partnership can contribute towards improving practice and informing policy

The next section describes the role of meta-theorising with respect to this study.

3.1.2 Justification for a meta-theoretical approach to theory-building

The review of the literature, presented in the previous chapter, concluded with the presentation of a meta-theoretical framework. This section justifies its use in this thesis as its theoretical and analytical framework.

A meta-theory is a theory that synthesises more than two theories into a coherent frame for understanding them simultaneously (Patterson et al, 2001). According to Ritzer (2001), there are three types of meta-theorising. The first type entails using meta-theory as a means of attaining a deeper understanding of theory. The second type uses meta-theory as a source of overarching theoretical perspective; the idea being to integrate some or all of a field into a coherent framework. The third uses meta-theory to guide theory development by describing, prescribing and giving direction to what is acceptable and unacceptable as a theory. By so doing, an ontological arrangement of constructs can provide rich meta-theoretical views (Ritzer, 2001).

As this chapter and thesis is premised on the idea of building theory, it acknowledges that theory is a narrative comprised of a set of propositions used to explain some phenomena and “phenomena manifest from the lens of our epistemic stance” (Tennis, 2008). For the purpose of this thesis, I adopted Bates’ (2005:2-3) meaning of theory: to refer to the idea of developing an understanding, and being able to formulate an explanation of the

phenomenon under study. This chapter acknowledges the issues that are implicit in the organisation, classification and presentation of knowledge. They will be addressed in more detail within this chapter.

According to Ritzer (1991a, 1991b), metatheory serves four purposes: to gain a deeper understanding of extant theoretical work; to provide an overarching perspective of that work; to serve as a mechanism for evaluation and to serve as a prelude to future theoretical work.

3.1.3 Adopting an abductive approach

Abduction provides an alternative methodological approach to data where theoretical concepts and preconception get a more prominent role. Central to abduction is the need to emphasise anomalous or uncommon phenomena (Pierce, 1903) by examining the outliers in the data (Haigh, 2005). According to Agar (2006), this is to find “rich points” which can constitute observations that are uncomfortable, unexpected, interesting or potentially different in the area under examination. The processes of discovery contain ‘essential tensions’ and requires combining things which appear to be in opposition to each other (Kuhn, 1977). Once identified, there is a need to engage with the details in the data by engaging in more exploratory techniques (Behrens and Yu, 2003; Locke et al, 2004). This may require exploring a fleeting insight, an observation of a salient moment or just a feeling that something is not quite right (Locke et al, 2004). Practically, this precipitates a dynamic, iterative and recursive process of searching for new concepts, following hunches and exploring doubts (Agar, 2006; Locke et al, 2004). In order to restrain the potential of such an expansive procedure; which for this study kept ‘unravelling’, a successive

refinement of concepts is emphasized (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This may necessitate a movement of the historical timeline in order to add the results of the new ideas (Agar, 2006).

3.2 Methodology

This section explores my values and assumptions concerning this research. It explains how these frame the research questions and guide this study.

There ought to be a clear link between the aims of a research study, the philosophical position of its researcher and the methodology chosen to carry it out (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Methodology is described as a “general approach to studying research topics” (Silverman, 2010). The choice of methodology underpins the research strategy and provides a guiding theoretical basis on which to build (Silverman, 2010). This study is a reflection of my personal experiences, my professional discipline, the experiences of this study’s participants and the review of the literature presented in the previous chapter. Numerous research methodologies are in existence with different epistemological and ontological positions (Silverman, 2010). The choice of research methodology is based on assumptions held by the researcher and determines what the research is and how it should be conducted (Potter, 1996b). An explanation and justification for the philosophical beliefs which underpin it is fundamental as it provides a contextual framework to, not only understand the research, but also to communicate my position as the researcher (Burke, 2004).

It is important to address what lies behind the knowledge created from this research: the analysis of its data, the interpretations placed on it and the interpretations claimed for it. It has been influenced by my ontological concern with the nature and structure of the world and what can be known about it (Wand and Weber, 1993:220). It has also been influenced by my epistemological orientation and how I view the world regarding knowledge creation and the entities which may constitute it and how I go about finding out what I believe can be known (Wainright, 1997).

Thomas Kuhn (1962) first used the term 'paradigm'; a word which originated from the Greek word 'paradeigma' which means pattern, to refer to "an integrated cluster of substantive concepts, variables and problems attached with corresponding methodological approaches and tools". A research paradigm can be described as a system of interrelated practices and thinking that defines the nature of enquiry for the research process along three major dimensions: ontology, epistemology and methodology (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999). A paradigm has a set of beliefs, values and assumptions in common which guide how the research should be conducted (Kuhn, 1977). It is best understood as what we think about the world, but cannot prove, and provides a general framework which guides the study by defining it in terms of these dimensions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The assumptions that underpin a chosen paradigm determine what questions the researcher asks and how these questions are answered (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999). The adoption of a paradigm positions the researcher philosophically and determines the relationship with the study's respondents, the data and the findings and influences the conclusions that are drawn from it (Burgess et al, 2006). Research methodologies are based on the assumptions held by the researcher and determine what research is and how it should be conducted (Potter, 1996a). As such, they reveal the broad philosophical perspectives from which the

research takes place. The next section explains, and justifies, the decisions I made regarding my chosen paradigm for this study.

3.2.1 Interpretive paradigm

Research paradigms can be classified into three distinct philosophical categories: positivism, interpretivism and critical postmodernism (Yin, 1994; Creswell, 1998). In evaluating the appropriateness of paradigms for this study, I rejected the use of a positivist tradition which takes as its position an objective view of reality that is determined by the researcher positioning themselves at a distance from the research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). This was not appropriate for this study as I do not subscribe to the notion of their being an objective reality ‘out there’ for a researcher to ‘discover’ with respect to this area of research. I believe that all perceptions are mediated through individual belief systems and assumptions that individuals have and are further complicated by the time and context in which they are located (Walkerdine et al, 2002). This research aims to understand the meanings ascribed to perceptions, experiences and actions by this study’s participants and recognizes that knowledge is both subjective and socially constructed (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

The interpretivist paradigm suggests that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2005:12). This paradigm focuses on the holistic perspective of the person and provides an opportunity for the voice, concerns and practices of research participants to be heard (Weaver and Olson, 2006). As an interpretive paradigm supports the view that there are many truths and multiple realities, it shares its philosophical foundations with a qualitative methodology and is, therefore, appropriate for this study. As this study’s researcher, I can be responsive to the context in which I am collecting the data and construct meanings from

the data, from the outset of the study, through small, iterative-cycles of analysis. The interpretivist researcher recognizes the impact of their own experiences, interpretations and the view of their participants on the research (Creswell, 1998, 2005). Therefore, within the context of my own study because I am studying a complex, multi-layered context, I aligned myself to an interpretive paradigm. This enabled me to be sensitive to the different contexts and circumstances that this research explored.

As this study sought to explain the dynamics of the contexts in which collaborative relationships are located, my decision was to use both an interpretive and critical approach. I have used Patton's (1990:38-39) criteria to justify this decision:

“Rather than believing that one must choose to align with one paradigm or the other, I advocate a paradigm of choices. A paradigm of choices rejects methodological orthodoxy in favour of methodological appropriateness”. Multi-paradigm perspectives have been advocated as acceptance that the boundaries between paradigms are blurred and mediated by others (Giddens, 1976). Other authors argue that they can create fresh insights as they start from different ontological and epistemological assumptions (Weaver and Gioia, 1994:568).

3.2.2 Critical realism

Critical realism has a realist ontology which means that it commences from the basis that the world exists in reality regardless of human activity and understanding (Dean et al, 2005). The critical realist starts from the premise that there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories and constructions but that there is no possibility

of attaining a single, 'correct', empirical "God's eye view" understanding of the world that is independent of any particular viewpoint (Putnam,1999). On the other hand, the epistemology of critical realism is more relative and recognises that knowledge and understanding is time and space specific (Baskar, 1975). Baskar (1986) argues that empiricism makes reference only to experience - the empirical - but that events go far beyond what is experienced and that the domain of 'the real structures' and mechanisms requires a larger conceptual map of reality (Baskar, 1989, 2002b).

This study explored and separated the real, actual and empirical layers (Dean et al, 2005) that make up this arena of investigation. I chose a qualitative critical realist interpretive methodology. As this research analyses the impact of partnership-working in the context of the study, a research design has been required that enables as broad a range of perspectives as possible to be obtained. A qualitative research methodology is viewed as an umbrella concept which encompasses several strands of inquiry: a process of understanding based on distinct and methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or a human problem (Merriam, 1988). In order to understand collaborative partnership activity, involving a range of organizational partners, it provided the in-depth, exploratory tools to achieve a clearer 'picture' of its composition. Having considered the positivist, interpretivist and critical realist research paradigms, I decided to locate this study within a critical realist interpretive research paradigm. I felt that this approach would be more appropriate to reveal the complex characteristics of the context and policy dynamics that surround partnership-working (Arvidson, 2009).

This study is exploring experiences and perceptions from this study's respondents, in a concept-laden terrain. It allows a close collaboration between the researcher and the participants of this study and acknowledges the significance of participant knowledge

(Haigh, 2000). My orientation towards this research is underpinned by my belief that reality is socially constructed by people, and between people, who experience it and is shaped by the context in which it occurs (Gergen, 1999). Whilst the experience of reality differs from person to person, it is also something which is independent of the person experiencing it (Berger and Luckman, 1966). The ontological assumption of multiple realities and the need to faithfully represent these realities (Brower et al, 2000), leads to an epistemological approach that requires the researcher to be closely associated with their informants (Padgett, 1998). The emotional and intellectual struggles that are often experienced by the researcher, in an attempt to “formulate ideas, collect and interpret data and build theory” (Berg and Smith, 1988:11), raises an important question for the individual in terms of where they position themselves with regards to their research.

The next section explores the role of the researcher as ‘insider and outsider’ and explores its implications for this study.

3.2.3 Researcher reflexivity and the ‘insider/outsider’ paradox

This thesis is a cumulative reflection on my personal and professional experiences, the experiences and perceptions of this study’s participants and the review of the literature. Therefore, the research methodology has been based on assumptions held by me and has determined what the research is and how it should be conducted; revealing the broad philosophical perspective from which the research has taken place (Potter, 1996b). The role of the researcher needs to be subject to the same critical analysis and scrutiny as the research itself (Carolan, 2003). Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process and an

acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining ‘outside’ of the subject matter while conducting research (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999:228).

According to Aoki (1996), the concept of the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ are understood as a binary of two separate pre-existing entities which can be brought together and represent areas of ambiguity, ambivalence and paradox. As we position ourselves with respect to our qualitative research, we also position ourselves with respect to our respondents (Aoki, 1996). The first issue has been addressed in the previous section; the second will be addressed in this section.

During the initial stage of recruiting participants for this study, I identified a paradox: my insider status in relation to this study’s intended participants. I did not consider myself at time to be an ‘insider’ as I belonged to a different organisation; not located in the immediate location of any of the intended participants and their organisations. Nonetheless, I possessed detailed understanding of their roles and experiences, the needs of the learners they supported, the type of provision they provided and the outcomes of working in partnership. Reflecting on my role, and my a priori knowledge, highlighted my ‘insider’ status. I had to acknowledge the paradox of the duality of ‘knowing’ yet attempting to ‘not know the known’, as I noted in my diary at the time (Appendix 7). In reflecting in this way, I was trying to objectivise my position with respect to my research study. However, I realized that this was impossible to achieve in practice. This was untenable in a situation where, as the researcher, I was known as a practitioner and others knew me as a colleague. It created several dichotomies in terms of known respondents; eager to participate but interested in framing the direction of the study or articulating that they would not need to go into too much detail as ‘you’ll know what I mean’.

As reflexivity involves a questioning approach to participant responses and to one's own assumptions (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), for me, it meant attempting to 're-frame' my practitioner role to accommodate a role as a researcher. This was also whilst being a member of partnership arrangements with individuals who were going to become participants in this research. According to Schon (1988), there are two kinds of reflection: 'reflection on action', which occurs after an activity, and 'reflection in action', which occurs during an activity. I view these as two sides of the same 'transparency': happening simultaneously with one informing the other. By reflecting 'in action', the researcher is freed from theory and techniques (Schon, 1983) and is able to recognize a dilemma in a situation as it arises. By reflecting 'on action', a reflective practitioner is one that is; not only self-reflective, but also able to self-correct and to self-limit (Ulrich, 2001). An 'insider' position afforded me immediate access to a homogenous group of voluntary and community agency respondents and may have contributed more breadth and depth of understanding at the outset. The danger was that this study risked being 'shaped' more by my experiences and perceptions and the integration of them with participants as part of our shared practice. For this reason, a new respondent sample was recruited for this study. Previous potential respondents were diplomatically excused from the study; informed of their contribution to this study's initial 'scoping' exercise and provided with a summary of my reasons for the changes.

3.2.4 Research Approach

Qualitative researchers are "more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people feel and think in the circumstances in which they find themselves, than making judgements about whether these thoughts and feelings are valid (Banister et al, 1994; Bogdan and Biklen, 2006). As this study's data collection involved interviewing its

participants, the opportunity existed to “faithfully represent these realities” (Brower et al, 2000) and to explore the assumptions that underpin them. This study aimed to gain an understanding of the meaning of the perceptions, experiences and action of others. It is by its nature subjective and socially-constructed; representing an interpretive paradigm (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

This enquiry aimed to contribute explanations for the meanings ascribed to partnership by reporting the views of this study’s informants conducted in a natural setting (Creswell, 1994). The adoption of a qualitative approach was intended to capture the perceptions of those working in partnerships and to create a deeper level of understanding and a clearer representation of the different perceptions from the individual informants. Qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). It attempts to make sense of or to interpret phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) in terms of the meanings people attribute to it (Alexander, 2006). As qualitative research is multi-method in its focus (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), I felt it to be a suitable approach for this study. According to Creswell (1994), research that explores people's perceptions in an under-explored area is particularly suited to a qualitative approach. The design of this research aimed to build a picture of the complex processes that operate within partnerships by incorporating a range of partners to address the semi-structured interview questions.

3.2.5 Data analysis

The term 'qualitative data' is generally taken to represent the “rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006:117). The purpose of data analysis is to simplify the data collected so that any patterns can easily be seen and the

underlying influences on these patterns may be revealed. In this way, “data are both the evidence and the clues” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006:117). According to Erickson (1986:149), “the corpus of materials collected in the field are not data themselves, but resources for data.” Even interview transcripts, or interview notes, are not data but documentary materials from which data must be constructed through some formal means of analysis (Erickson, 1986:149).

According to Patton (1990), the process of working with qualitative data is both a science and an art of critical, analytical thinking and creative innovative perspectives. The literature describes numerous processes for the researcher to use in reducing and analyzing the volume of text which emerges from the data collection procedures, such as interviews, focus group, observations and documentation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994, 1998).

Lincoln (2002:6) cautions that:

“data and information are not evidence until two things happen: first, someone recognises it as data, and second, an inquirer subjects it to some form of systematic analysis, which turns it into evidence directed toward some question or argument”.

As the data from this study was produced from social interactions, and are therefore constructions or interpretations, there is no data which is uncontaminated by human thought and actions (Bogden and Biklen, 2006:117). There is no position from which to claim neutrality and produce value-free data (Alexander, 2006; Hartsock, 1983). The analysis of the data ought to include consideration of the inferences and interpretations as well as the concrete phenomena (Lincoln, 2002). Any claims made about the data should

be based on an adequate selection of the total corpus of data (Lincoln, 2002:9). It is for these reasons that I did not wish to annex this study to one particular theoretical or hypothetical way of thinking. I wanted it to retain a theoretical flexibility. One of the challenges for me, as this study's researcher, is what constituted a suitable framework for analyzing the data. There are a number of processes and procedures whereby the researcher can move into being able to understand, interpret and explain the qualitative data collected from the study (Leedy, 1997; Altricher and Somekh, 1993). However, a review of the literature did not single out one method in preference to another. Indeed, the more I read, the less convinced I became that there was one analytical method that was suitable for this study. The literature does not advocate a method of data analysis for a qualitative interpretive critical realist approach in this area of research. As there was not an 'off the shelf' analytical framework that I felt was suitable for how I wished to conduct my analysis, I resorted to creating a synthesis of recognized analytical processes and adapting them for use in this study.

3.3 Summary

This chapter has outlined the design of this research which has been guided by a critical realist interpretive methodology and overlaid with an abductive approach. It has justified it as being appropriate for researching the different meanings and constructions that people put on their experiences (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991). A justification for a meta-theoretical framework for analysis has been presented in this chapter. The next chapter presents the methods and techniques used to collect and analyse the data from this study.

Chapter Four

Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the methodological considerations and orientation for this research and located it within an interpretative critical realist paradigm. The research method is a strategy of enquiry which moves from these underlying assumptions to the design of the research and data collection (Myers, 2000). This chapter describes the processes for generating, collecting and analysing the data within the methodological and theoretical frameworks of this research. It concludes with an exploration of the limiting factors and ethical considerations and their implications for the procedures and data. This section presents a ‘road map’ along which this study moved from its underlying philosophical assumptions presented in chapter three to the data collection; what Yin, (2003a, 2003b) describes as the ‘here to there’. By so doing, it locates this ‘road map’ within the design ‘architecture’ presented in chapter three.

4.1.1 Recruitment of Participants

Participants for this study were selected from individuals where I believed that the most information could be learned. This is viewed as a legitimate method of selecting the sample (Merriam, 1998). This was purposeful sampling, which is a non-random method of sampling, where the researcher selects what Patton (2002) refers to as “information-rich” cases for study in depth. Only those respondents who had recent experience of delivering learning and skills development within their local or regional partnerships, were included.

Despite my original intention to recruit a sample that consisted of individuals from voluntary and community organisations, I had to reconsider the logistics of doing so as a result of factors that materialized at the time of recruiting and had the potential to undermine this study. These issues are addressed, as part of the discussions related to ethical considerations and limitations, presented in sections 4.4 and 8.2. As a result of identifying these issues early on, I recruited a new sample of participants and extended the sample to include organisations who worked with VCOs. This was mainly due to the difficulty of recruiting sufficient numbers of voluntary and community organisations for interview purposes.

At the time of recruiting in 2008, many organisations from all sectors were experiencing significant ‘head winds’ of high levels of uncertainty. This contributed to the difficulties I experienced in recruiting a homogenous sample of VCOs. For a new sample, my criteria still applied: non-VCOs had to be actively engaged in either learning and skills delivery or ‘back and front house’ administration and recruitment of learners with VCOs. Participants were recruited for this study by a direct approach: via telephone, email, in person to their organisations or during conferences and network meetings where third sector organisations were present. All twenty-five individuals recruited for this research study had relevant and recent experience of working in partnership but had not, to my knowledge, worked together in a professional capacity. This approach contributed towards strengthening this research study.

Twenty-five respondents were included in the final sample frame. See Appendix 3 for anonymised list of participants and the nature of the organisations they worked for. The sample was made up of fifteen third sector organisations. Six of these were VCOs. Of the remaining nine, one was an infrastructure support agency which had developed from a

small VCO. The two social enterprises were run by managers with VCO experience. The tenant and resident association manager had previously run the local community centre and the VCO funding officer had previously worked for VCOs and the local authority. The selection of two local authorities, one secondary school, one college and two local housing associations was an easier task as they were listed and limited in number within the areas encompassed by this study. They represented some of the local public sector agencies with a history of working in partnership with local voluntary and community sector organisations in their area.

The private business interview respondents were represented by those from smaller and larger organisations with incomes from the tens and hundreds of thousands to the millions of pounds per year. As part of their regional business structure, the two larger businesses had branches based in the areas included in this study. Their history of working with their local VCOs was part of their remit towards their corporate social responsibility. This meant that they donated materials and/or labour (members of their staff) to capital infrastructure projects in areas where their business was located. Two of these companies were building houses; upgrading rental properties for local housing associations or conducting infrastructure improvements as part of local authority schemes of works. This meant that they were very interested in being part of any locally-focused attempt to facilitate improvements towards working in partnership with local groups; some of whom were tenants of the social landlords they were working for. This also extended to being interested in taking part in this research study.

The smaller business included in this study represent local, privately-owned enterprises. These are convenience stores who donate refreshments to a local community project. They also represent smaller DIY stores who provide discounted materials to local skills-

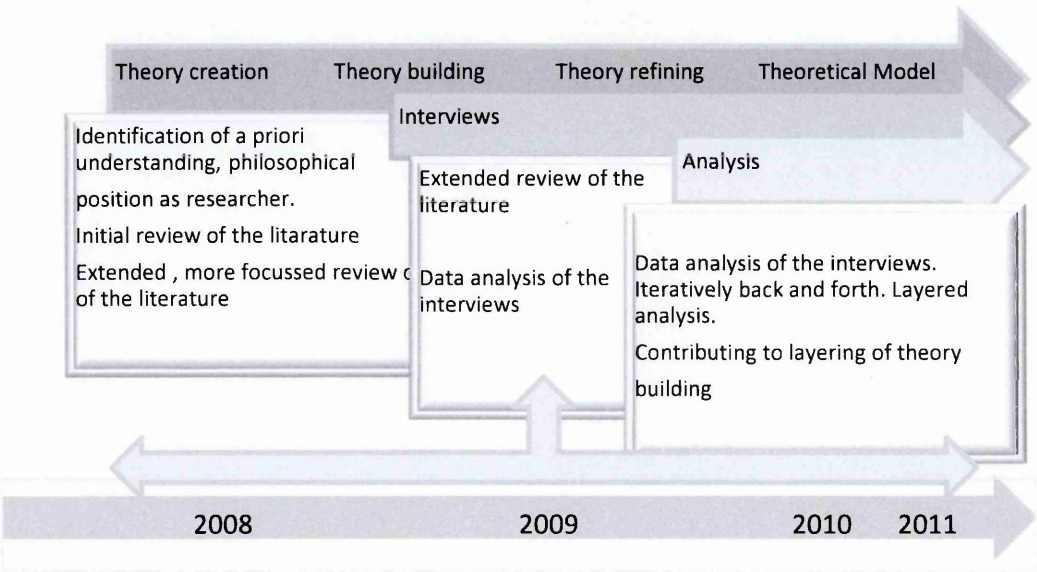
development projects. They were often involved in their communities as volunteers in different capacities. This included fund-raising and adult literacy and numeracy mentoring. Sometimes, they also delivered specialist training alongside other trainers. Several suitable local businesses were approached to take part in this study. All but two declined on the basis of not having enough time to become involved at that particular time. They expressed a wish to make their local contribution in the form of free materials to the local community centre or discounts on items for those attending certain types of locally-based courses i.e. horticultural or do-it-for-yourself craft courses.

I have operated professionally across the North West region for more than twenty-five years. I believe that the sample, presented for this study, is representative of the heterogeneous mix of different types of organisations coming together at that time. Fifteen of the participants had experience in facilitating cross-regional partnerships between the statutory, business, voluntary and community sectors. At the time of recruiting participants in 2008, there was no comprehensive list of third sector organisations operating across the North West of England, against which this study's respondents could be verified for representativeness of sample. All respondents were either salaried or volunteer representatives of a VCO or worked with local VCOs, as part of their public or private sector role. The result of this second recruitment 'drive' was a list of twenty-five participants for this study. Appendix 3 shows the organisational type and the name code allocated to each participant so that their narratives can be ascribed whilst protecting their anonymity.

4.1.2 Overview of study timeframe and components of research

Figure 4.1 presents the research study timeframe and depicts the process of its development, its overlapping nature and relationship with the process of theory building.

Figure 4.1: Study timeframe (see Appendix 7c for original Research Diary mind map)



4.1.3 Design of Instrument

A research instrument was constructed to answer the research questions presented in 1.3 (see Appendix 4 for the Interview Protocol). Areas were identified from the review of the literature and are reflected in the themes presented in Table 1 (4.2.3). To ensure that the instrument had a strong theoretical basis, the research instrument was grounded in the literature review. This was to increase the validity of this study by more accurately identifying the elements to which it refers (Silverman, 2010). Section 4.5 explains this further by describing which steps were taken to strengthen the validity and reliability of this study.

As qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that individuals construct elements of their social environment as interpretations, these interpretations are often situational and transitory in nature (Gall et al, 1996). Representing them presents a significant practical and ethical challenge for the researcher (Bassey, 1981) as does trying to make sense of the meanings that participants place on the phenomena under investigation (Burns, 1997; Boyatzis, 1998). On a practical level, when it comes to the design of the instrument for collecting data, “items should be stated in as simple and clear language as possible, should contain a simple idea, and should be unambiguous” (Shaw and Wright, 1967:567). A range of interview approaches were considered. The method chosen for this research was semi-structured interviews to facilitate the flow of the interview and to generate rich data (Bassey, 1990). The next section discusses how the study was conducted and the data collected and analysed.

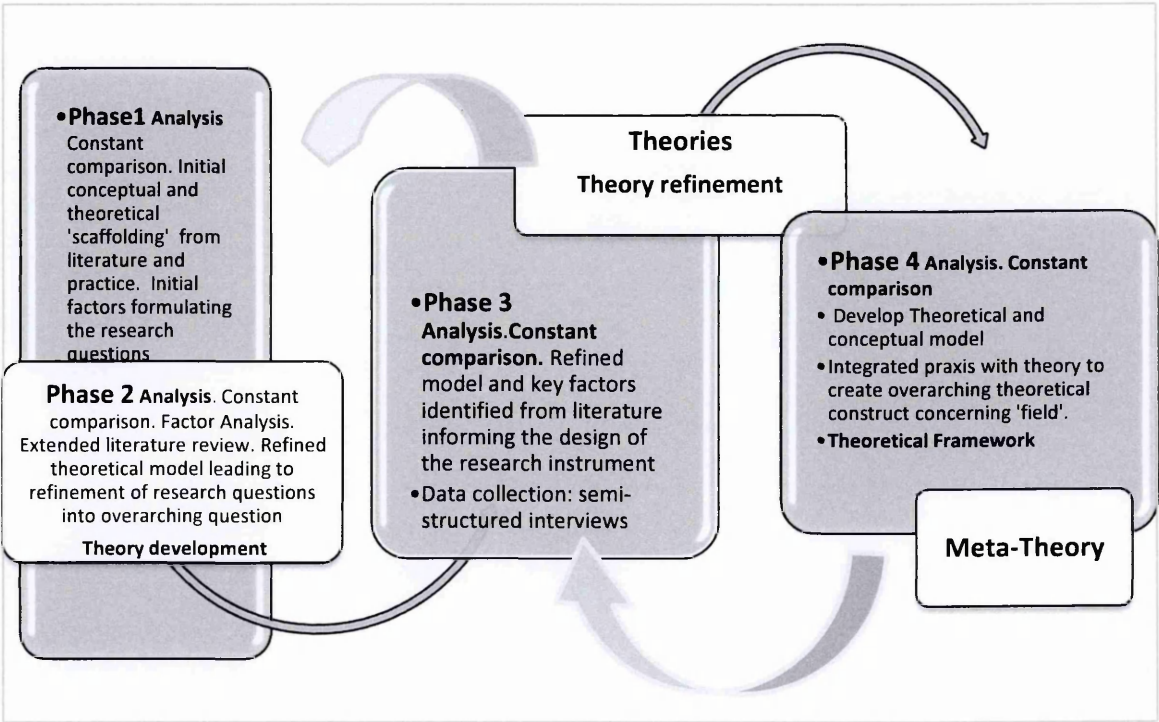
4.2 Data Analysis Procedures

As has previously been discussed, the conceptual and theoretical basis of this research has developed over the timeline of this study. This has implications for how the data was analysed. Analysis and theory-building took place from the outset of the period of data collection. As this section explains, my analysis was divided into four phases. Figure 4.2 explains the relationship between each phase and the process of theory development. It demonstrates a process which was both iterative and recursive (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

Firstly, an initial ‘sweep’ of the general literature was made to identify issues and recurrent themes which informed the initial framing of the research questions and the interview

questions. Secondly, stages two and three did the same with the review of the literature and each participant’s interview. Thirdly, stage four provided the explanatory analysis of the findings and is further addressed within the theoretical framework that evolved from the analysis of the literature and which will be discussed in chapter seven. Figure 4.2 presents a model of my conceptualization of the processes that have been distilled into phases of analysis and indicates their relationship with the process of theory development for this study.

Figure 4.2: Phases of analysis and relationship with theory: a personal conceptualisation



The following section will clarify how each phase of the analysis was conducted and how the outcomes from each were addressed within this study.

4.2.1 Phase 1 Analysis

Initial review of the literature and creation of initial codes

This section explains the process of analysis that constituted the initial sweep of the literature that took place at the outset of this study. Section 4.4 clarifies the decisions that were made regarding the original Phase 1 data. This process was used to both inform and to help the development of the interview questions. It enabled me to gain a broader and more nuanced appreciation of the academic, policy and organisational literature. Taken together, the literature began to highlight a number of recurring narratives and dominating discourses. In order to ‘capture’ these, I used what Silverman (2010) refers to as an open coding process whereby each document was coded in terms of the key themes, or groups of related themes (categories) and rhetorical devices. Figure 4.3 demonstrates my simplistic conceptualization of the process of coding and categorising that was employed as a procedure for this study.

Figure 4.3: Process for coding and categorizing: a personal conceptualisation

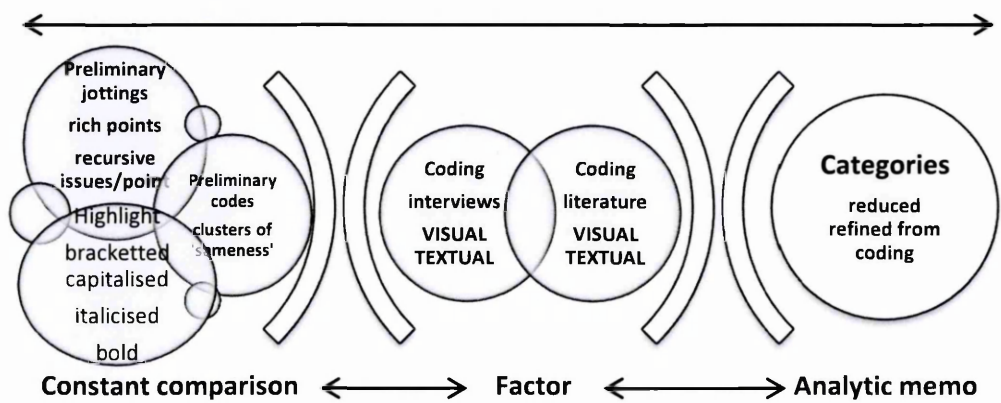


Figure 4.4 presents a conceptualisation of the process whereby I moved back and forth through the literature and recognizing a “rich point” (Agar, 2006): a recursive idea, phrase, term, problem, issue, challenge, they were highlighted in the text and noted down.

The following demonstrates the alignment of a fragment of text, from the initial review of the literature, and demonstrates how preliminary codes were identified and refined using the process presented in Figure 4.3. This technique was used to code the interviews.

Figure 4.4: Literature extract for example of process of coding and categorising
(HM Treasury, 2006)

<u>Column 1</u>	<u>Column 2</u>	<u>Column 3</u>	<u>Column 4</u>
Raw Data	Preliminary Codes	Final Code	Category
“it is <u>vital</u> that <u>partners</u> from the public, private and <u>particularly</u> the <u>third sector</u> <u>work together</u> to identify <u>problems</u> , develop solutions”	important targeted homogenising concept challenges	recruitment message	government

Appendix 10 provides examples of coded extracts from the same document, ‘The Local Government White paper: strong and prosperous communities’ (HM Treasury, 2006:9).

4.2.2 Phase 2 Analysis: Literature, interviews and theory development

In practice, this was achieved by reading and re-reading the text. In moving ‘back and forth’ through the content of interviews and the literature, I am attempting to do what Patton (2002:453) describes as the process of content analysis: “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings.” Themes and patterns were identified and by

comparing data across different data sets, such as interviews, research journal entries and documentary sources, this enabled me to verify existing reductions in the data to modify what had already been reduced. It also helped me to identify new patterns and themes which could be formed into categories. The interview notes were read several times in order to identify concepts, themes, formulate categories and to examine the relationship between them. All the interview notes were prepared and read by me and a random sample read by a third party who was not associated with this study, to confer with me over the coding decisions made and to check for consistency. A preliminary analysis of the interviews took place at the time of note-taking during interviews. Additional note-making followed immediately after the interviews and then further refinement of my notes, which incorporated post-interview feedback responses from interviewees. This recursive process provided me with the opportunity to explore multiple meanings and perceptions and to identify several key themes.

As the procedure for gathering the interview data extended over the period of the study (2009 – 2011), interview notes were re-read and cross- referenced with the existing coding several times. This generated a large corpus of data to manage; the reviewing of which precipitated the identification of better ways of coding the data for clarity. In the event of new codes emerging, and not previously having been noted on earlier interview notes, additional notes were made and dated accordingly. The process was iterative in nature and the process developed the categories. The categories were then conceptualized into themes such as ‘trust’, ‘communication’ and ‘funding’. As I read and re-read the data, my understanding began to change. It did not represent what had been my original and rather narrow and somewhat fragmented understanding of the phenomena. Instead, what began to emerge was an expanding visual conceptual and theoretical mind map. Appendix 9 provides an example of one of my hand-drawn, mind maps: “an attempt at ‘capturing’ the

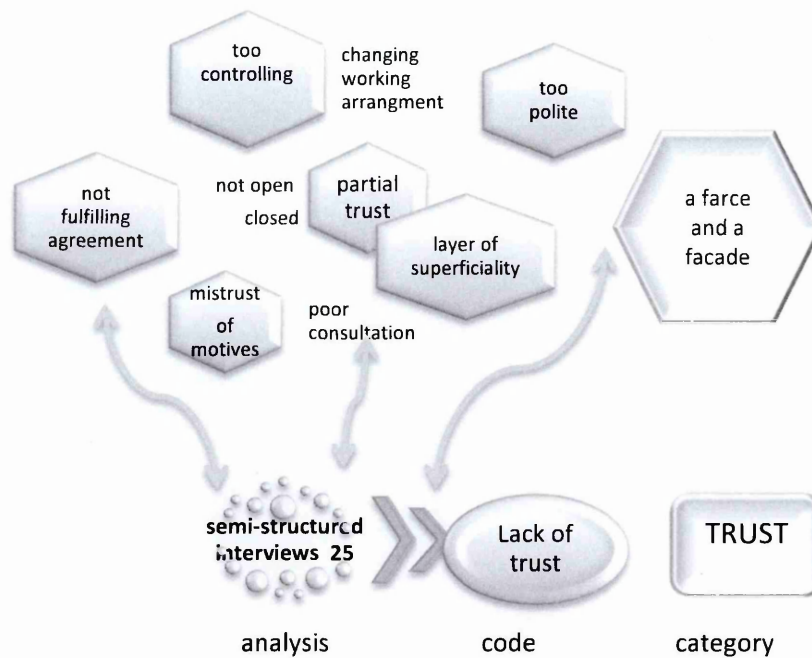
sometimes fleeting ‘noticings’ of a conceptually rich and ambiguous, theoretically layered typology”.

The following is an extract from one of the twenty-five interviews. The tenant and resident association volunteer described a meeting she had recently attended to discuss the proposed, funded, skills programme that was due to start:

“A farce and a façade There was nothing I could quite point to and say that wasn’t right but I sensed that there was a layer of superficiality about the way we were speaking that was too polite and a little too controlling. We were meant to be there to discuss what was going to happen, but I felt that that conversation had already taken place before we arrived.”

The underlined words represent the initial coding for this sample interview extract. The data was coded using each participant’s own language phrases, such as: “a farce and a façade”. Figure 4.5 represents my model which provides a simplified ‘visualisation’ for the cascading flow effect of how ‘units’ of data formed patterns which suggested a code and a category. I believed that these underlying units had ‘lack of trust’ in common. Therefore, trust became the code and ‘Trust’ became the category.

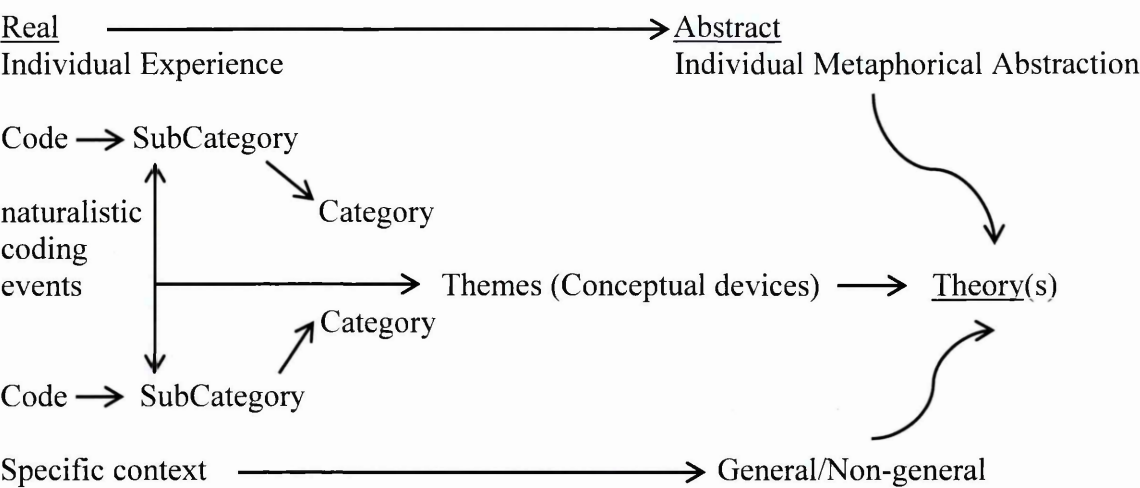
Figure 4.5: Cascade of phrases highlighted in the interviews and coded for trust



4.2.3 Phase 3 Analysis: Interviews, validation and theory refinement

This section highlights the key cross-cutting themes that emerged from the analysis of all the interviews. This analysis provides additional substance to the findings of the desk research, by identifying the qualitative themes that emerged from discussions with participants. Qualitative themes emerging from this research were based on the number of times they were raised. Figure 4.6 presents a model to represent the process of moving from the data units towards theory. The process of creating a visual conceptualisation helped to clarify the 'opaque' experience of being immersed in this process and facilitated its own small 'scaffold'. This, in turn, helped to provide a framework for the underlying structures of experiences and processes (Thomas, 2006).

Figure 4.6: Codes to theory model to represent analysis (Appendix 7)



To ensure validity within this process, I asked a critical friend; not connected with this study, to check a random sample of interview summaries and to check my use of the allocation of a simple code system for consistency. This necessitated randomly selecting five interview summaries - from the first, second and third readings of the interviews - to read, check my annotations, additional comments and resulting codes. This process was carried out on the semi-structured interview note summaries conducted during stage two of the data-gathering. Any minor differences in perception of coding that emerged were eliminated after discussion and clarification of issues of semantics concerning words and phrases used. Alternatively, if this was not the case, then this necessitated me re-visiting each set of interview notes. The coding and the categories proved to be consistent in general across the data-gathering. I then checked and made any necessary modifications after re-reading the original interview. After this initial analysis of the interview notes, any additional questions that I had identified as not having been asked but of possible relevance to the study, were noted. I then spoke either directly, in person or on the telephone, with the respondent and solicited their opinion on the additional questions.

In keeping with my framework for analysis, the draft themes that I had identified were sent to each respondent for review and they were invited to comment on them. One respondent commented in her email feedback to me:

“Yes, I agree with the themes *but* (Italics her emphasis) I think they [the themes] only represent a small part of third sector politics, policy and practice. I am beginning to think that it is all a lot more complicated than I had previously thought. *Perhaps*, that is part of the difficulty, it *is* more difficult and most of us just *don't* have the time, energy or capacity to join up the *many* dots” (VCO, Administrator).

Other respondents suggested minor amendments to their comments to clarify a point, a perception or a phrase or to amend an error in my notes. Another respondent wished to add more themes to the list that he felt were important but accepted that the themes were “important enough on their own to warrant further investigation” (Business, Owner).

The following table (Table 1) presents a summary of the themes identified from the data. The format of their presentation has been adopted from Huxham and Vangen (2005) as a method of differentiating between practitioner and researcher-generated themes. My diary and whiteboard ‘mind maps’ (Appendices 7 and 9) demonstrate the process behind the aligning of these themes. Appendix 10 provides a coded extract of a document that precipitated some of them.

Table 2: Themes from the analysis of the interviews

<p>Participant-generated themes: issues perceived by practitioners that were recurrent in the interviews</p> <p>Respect Roles and boundaries Common ground Resource sharing Communication Trust establishing and maintaining Risk assessment, sharing and evaluation Accountability expectations and procedures Identity existing and new Financial uncertainty and opportunity Mission keep and drift Equity between individuals and organisational representation Reduced choices to learn</p> <p>Researcher-generated themes: issues identified by researcher that were recurrent in the interviews</p> <p>Social capital Power asymmetries Contradictions Re-branding and the role of third sector New organisational structures</p>
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4.2.4 Phase 4 Analysis: Procedures for developing a theoretical and conceptual model to articulate a complex terrain

This study uses the theoretical ‘scaffolding’ presented in Chapter Two. The review of the literature suggested a complex, fragmented and diverse theoretical terrain. The use of linguistic devices, such as metaphors, has enabled me to articulate my understanding of a ‘complex terrain’ and to try to present that as a visual articulation and abstraction of it (Appendix 7). The distinction between the use of the term ‘scaffold’ and ‘framework’ is a

significant metaphorical one in terms of this study. For me, the term ‘scaffolding’ represents a temporary structure which offers access to areas but is restrictive in its conceptual and theoretical ‘reach’ to its own ‘geography’. My use of the term ‘framework’, represents a more permanent metaphorical structure that can be developed in situ and is more rooted in its own geography. For me, the latter, signifies more permanence, whilst at the same time, inviting the possibility of change. I appreciate that the use of metaphorical devices for articulating complex social phenomenon, can have their uses. I also appreciate that they are highly personalized abstractions. This study is concerned with understanding the social, political and economic dynamics that precipitate and sustain problems such as increasing the participation of marginalized groups (Bhaskar, 1986; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). Articulating and presenting a visual impression of the dynamics of partnership, requires a conceptualising ‘palette’ that can help; not only help to join up the theoretical and conceptual ‘dots’, but also to ‘colour’ them in. The following (Figure 4.7) provides an example of the identification of metaphorical devices in participant interviews, in the literature and the adoption of them within this thesis in order to articulate a complex terrain.

Figure 4.7: Metaphorical devices for articulating a complex terrain

Metaphor: the nature of partnership working		
Researcher generated metaphors	Participant generated metaphors	Literature generated metaphors
‘theoretical lenses’ ‘headwinds’ ‘mosaic typology’ ‘fault lines’ ‘fractures/fissures’	‘strategic tightrope’ (VCO) ‘conduit of trust’(Infrastructure) ‘fine-grained detail’ (Faith Org)	‘thick and thin trust’ (Newton, 1997) ‘rich points’ (Agar, 2006) ‘under the radar’ (McCabe, 2010);

Chapter eight presents the conceptual model which utilises metaphorical devices to visually articulate a complex terrain.

4.3 Rejected methods and methodology

I had initially considered a case study approach for collecting data in order to address the research questions. There were two main reasons for excluding this as a method of collecting data for this study. Firstly, this was due to the reservations that were expressed by some interview respondents regarding the more intense focus that a case study approach would have on their organisations. This was expressed as being ‘a little too intense at this particularly challenging time’. At the point of recruiting participants for this study, I felt that I did not wish to risk alienating suitable participants. Secondly, on closer reflection, I also felt that a case study approach also raised a number of ethical and methodological concerns which would have impacted negatively in terms of trust, confidentiality and safeguarding the anonymity of participants. It would have provided a more detailed set of potentially identifiable organizational dynamics.

I had also briefly considered documentary evidence as a means of generating part of the dataset and the use of a discourse analytic methodology. My reason behind this was that the use of documentary information could “help uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insight relevant to the research problem” (Merriam, 1998:118). In addition, it could also provide information that was not available by more direct methods such as interviewing. However, I decided that a comprehensive review of the literature, and a larger sample of participants, would enable me to develop a suitably insightful and appropriate methodology for this study in order to answer the research questions.

My original intention for the data collection stage was to conduct unstructured interviews with respondents and to record the interview sessions with their permission. However, when this was started with three interviews in the original interview sample, this form of

interviewing allowed too many protracted broader contextual discussions to develop and left little time to explore each participant's working context in more detail.

I had originally intended to record all interviews and transcribe them to provide me with transcriptions to analyse. My initial conversations with participants had elicited that there was agreement for me to record each interview and to transcribe each one. Given my original idea to include a discourse analytic method, this would have been ideal. However, as three participants did not want me to record their interviews, and two more were hesitating to agree, this brought into question the viability of being able to record interviews. Two main reasons were provided. Firstly, several participants felt it would make the experience less natural and therefore they would not feel as relaxed. Secondly, the reason focused on participants feeling uncomfortable with the idea of having their personal comments recorded. This was despite assurances from me that the material would be erased after the transcripts had been produced and that the original transcript would be given to each participant. I had to reject the idea of recording interviews. Silverman (2010) suggests that the interviewer needs to be aware of the impact on the data from the manner in which it is collected. I accepted that, given the context of economic instability that prevailed at the time, there was a level of nervousness and uncertainty that permeated in all directions. Automated recording facilities were not used during the interviews.

If recording had not been rejected, I probably would have had to consider doing so. The result of increasing the number of interviews would have meant a significant increase in the time each interview would have required for transcription. A draft transcription needed to be sent out to be verified by each participant. Amendments needed to be made as a result of any corrections by the participant. Each 60-90 minute transcription required more than six hours per interview to transcribe and re-present to the participant.

A research diary was maintained throughout the duration of this study to differentiate between recordings of substantive factual accounts of details from meetings and analytical interpretive accounts; representing an idea or a question from those meetings. The researcher's diary is an acceptable vehicle to help reconstruct events and to provide information about social relationships (Burgess, 1984). I rejected the inclusion of extracts from it in the study but several are included in Appendix 7 of this thesis.

At the outset of this study, I had considered observation as a data collection method. This included noting down observations in my research journal, during and after meetings, conferences and community events, on matters related to the focus of the study. As a result of reflecting on this procedure, I concluded that it would create an artificial environment, and possibly create conflict between the participant and the researcher; compromising the quality of any data gathered. This would place the researcher, me, in the role of 'inspector of practice' (researcher's term) and further compromise the notion of representing naturalistic settings for collecting data (Denzin, 1978; Burgess, 1984). Cantrell (1993) suggests that observation can be disadvantageous because it can be time-consuming, produce too much data and alter the setting for the research. Furthermore, there were a number of potential ethical issues that would have resulted in its weakness as a research method. It raised issues concerning confidentiality and anonymity for participants. Addressing the above considerations, regarding the design of this study, contributed further towards strengthening it.

The next section identifies and addresses additional ethical considerations that arose during the design of this study.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics, in qualitative research, has traditionally covered issues such as informed consent, right to privacy, confidentiality, mutual respect, anonymity and protection from harm (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:20); all of which and are addressed in the research design of this study.

This section addresses a number of ethical considerations that arose during the initial design of this study. Ethics addresses questions related to values and morality (Schreuder and Theron, 1997:4) and focuses on what is right and what is wrong. They are imperative in the qualitative research method (Altrichter and Somekh, 1993:77). Miles and Huberman (1994:288) suggest that researchers should consider the morality of their actions with respect to the people whose lives they are studying. Of concern to me was the safeguarding of my participants anonymity; respecting their confidentiality and obtaining informed consent from them to express their private sentiments. Stake (1994a) described qualitative researchers as “guests in the private spaces of the world” and that “manners should be good and their code of ethics strict”.

At the outset of this research, safeguarding the anonymity of this study’s participants was of paramount importance to me. Several of those who wanted to take part in this study did not wish their colleagues, within their own organisations, to know that they were taking part or other agencies. At this stage of this study, I was gathering together the potential respondents for the main data-gathering stage. It was very difficult to see how anonymity could be achieved given that many of the participants in the initial interview group meetings knew each other or worked together in the local area and knew me. As I worked with several of the organisations present at the initial interview meetings (constituting an

earlier Phase 1), I was not comfortable with the idea of recruiting them for inclusion in the main study. I felt it unduly biased the research with there being an existing relationship. This made anonymity impossible within the study and would have included part of a sample whose views I was already very familiar with from our conversations.

Around the time of conducting the pre-study interviews (for what was the original Phase 1 stage), I was approached by a senior member of one of the organisations represented at the meeting, but a non-participant of the study at that time. I was asked if I could report directly to him concerning anything that was said concerning the organisation before I wrote it. My study participant had approached her line manager to ask for permission to take part in the main stage of the research study and was intending to record the experience as continuous professional development (CPD). I showed the line manager my interview question protocol and assured him that nothing inflammatory would be written by me. I assured him that my study was not intended to portray any local organisation in a negative way; just to highlight the personal perceptions of those working in partnerships with other organisations. I further assured him that all data was presented anonymously so as not to identify participants or their organisations within this study. The participant decided to withdraw from the study after the first interview; citing pressure from her manager to do so. She was happy for me to include her interview comments, but did not wish to have further discussions concerning its content. I excluded her interview comments from the group interview notes and notified her accordingly. These issues highlighted important flaws in the initial recruitment of participants for this study and were addressed in 4.1.1 with the recruitment of a new sample of participants. As a consequence, the initial Phase 1 data was not included in the main study. This data was set aside and did not contribute towards the main analysis for this study which was only based on the data from the second sample. Phase 1 data contributed towards the background context in 2008.

There was no specific authoritative body to which I needed to approach to seek approval for this study. The British Educational Research Association's 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' were incorporated into the research process from the outset and have been regularly visited during the course of its development to ensure compliance. However, the issue of conducting ethical research extends beyond adherence to codes of conduct (Edwards, 2001). It is important that I examined the various processes of the research for factors; both seen and unseen, that might affect participants or have repercussions outside the immediate realm of the research; this also extended to me examining my own motives with respect to this research (O'Neill & Tricket, 1982; O'Neill, 1989; Robson, 2002).

Another potential impact on the research, and the research participants, could have been that of the 'observer effect': an issue that concerns the extent to which an observer affects the situation under observation (Robson, 2002). As the researcher, my presence as 'observer' had the potential to change the phenomenon I was observing and would have been difficult to mitigate against its influence in practice. However, as has previously been mentioned, observation data has only been utilized within this study to contextualise and provide additional insights for understanding and interpreting events and perceptions of participants.

Ethical considerations also extend to the issue of 'bias': the error which arises when the researcher allows their own values and expectations to influence the way the research is conducted and has the potential to impact a study at any stage of the inquiry (Bassey, 1990). As the researcher, I needed to be self-critical; examine my own assumptions, methods of inquiry, analysis and methods of presenting my findings (Bassey, 1990). The use of a researcher's diary is recommended as a way of raising the researcher's awareness

of personal bias (Burgess, 1981). This is an instrument adopted for this study and included within the context of this thesis where appropriate.

4.5 Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study

In order to present a qualitative study which is trustworthy, measures can be incorporated into its design that addresses the concepts of its validity and reliability (Silverman, 2010). On a practical level, when it comes to the design of the instrument for collecting data, “items should be stated in as simple and clear language as possible, should contain a simple idea and should be unambiguous” (Shaw and Wright, 1967:567). In order to safeguard the reliability of this study, I needed to address potential areas for researcher error such as in the formulation of the interview questions which needed to be clear and relevant to the research study’s objectives (Webb et al, 1966). I also needed to ensure the accuracy between the hand-written recorded data and what occurred in the setting the interviews were taking place in and how I interpreted and analysed it. Validity is used in this study to ensure that the data collected includes everything it should and that it does not include anything it should not include (Hartley, 1994). Therefore, the research instrument was grounded in the literature review to increase its validity: “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Silverman, 2010). Validity is achieved through evidence rather than methods and is a primary goal of qualitative research (Yin, 1994). It represents the degree to which findings from the research study present a true and accurate picture of what is being claimed (Silverman, 1993:149).

There were many areas in the process of collecting data from respondents that could have compromised the validity of this study and the degree to which I could legitimately make inferences (Denzin, 1978, 2003). I undertook appropriate measures throughout all stages of this research to maximise validity. On a practical level, my interview notes were given to participants to check that they reflected their perceptions accurately and to make comments on them if they did not.

This study has used several sources of data to obtain evidence to strengthen validity.

However, by using a combination of methods of data-gathering, such as from documentation and interviewing, the researcher is able to use different sources to validate and cross-reference - confirm - the findings (Patton, 1990). This process is referred to as 'triangulation': "using multiple data collection methods, data sources, analysis or theories in order to check the validity of the findings" (Leedy, 1997:167). The combination of several data collection methods enables cross-checking of information and provides for a more comprehensive picture of emergent issues as well as contributing towards the validation of the findings (Daly et al, 1997). Gathering data from different sources also provides the opportunity to corroborate views expressed in the research and can significantly increase the accuracy of the study and further contribute towards its validity (Creswell, 2005). A check for the validity of the findings of the research provides the opportunity to see if the methods measure what it is that they are intended to measure within the design of the research study and the research questions being investigated. Another definition of the complex concept of validity is suggested by Sapsford and Jupp (1996:1): "the design of research to provide credible conclusions; whether the evidence which the research offers can bear the weight of the interpretation that is put on it."

The qualitative and interpretative nature of this study necessitated the collection of non-numerical, primary and secondary data in the form of verbal exchanges from interviews between the researcher and the participants. As qualitative research studies phenomena in its natural setting, it is important that these settings are disrupted as little as possible by the presence of the researcher who is seeking to interpret meaning from them (Yin, 2003a; Silverman, 2010).

4.6 Summary

This chapter has outlined the research design for this study and how it was designed to explore the perceptions of individuals who work in partnership. The iterative nature of reflection has underpinned the development of this study. It has contributed towards a more blended and nuanced reflexive methodology (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). By so doing, it has mitigated against several potential limitations in its methods and methodology. The next two chapters will present the findings from this study's participants and their experiences of working in partnership.

Chapter Five

Working in partnership

5.1 Introduction

This is the first of two chapters that present the findings from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. Chapter Five and Chapter Six bring together the key themes identified from them. The main advantage of using interviews, as a data collection method in this research, was the detailed views that could be gathered from participants. In this chapter, and the following chapter, interview responses have been interwoven with findings from other data sources and have been treated as a component of a complex research context (Cassell et al, 2009). By so doing, they provide insights into the effect that working in partnership had on the individuals who took part in this study.

This chapter explores the range of activities undertaken by participants and questions their motivations to work in partnership. It amalgamates recurrent themes and issues with insights into areas of partnership working; supplied through the quotations from participants. It details the range of activities and approaches taken to working collaboratively and details some of the key issues, such as the role that trust and risk play in decision-making processes. It highlights a number of differences between the motivations that precipitate collaborative activities. This chapter attempts to ‘unpick’ particular areas in which participants identified ‘trust’ and ‘risk’ as having the potential to create obstacles that could undermine learning and skills provision. It presents the ways in which participants addressed them within the context of their work. One of the key findings, from the interview data, was just how difficult many individuals thought working

collaboratively could be; irrespective of the nature of the organisation they worked for: public, private or third sector.

Each of these two chapters is presented as a narrative that combines a discussion of the elements that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. A selection of quotations is included from respondents that are relevant to those elements. Chapter Five presents the themes from 4.2.3 that are related to experiences of multi-agency collaboration. Chapter Six presents the elements that constituted 'change factors' to working in partnership and emerged in relationship to those presented in this chapter. The findings presented in Chapter Five and Chapter Six provide the basis for the analysis and discussion presented in Chapter Seven, where they are located within the theoretical framework of this research.

Where words are presented in italics, it has been to indicate a particularly noticeable emphasis which was placed by respondents during their interviews and noted by me at the time in my interview notes. Where the use of bracketed inclusions [] has been noted in the text, it is for clarification of a term inferred by the participants. It is used to provide the reader with some of the subtle nuances associated with respondent narratives that would otherwise have been lost from the quotation (Fairclough, 2003). The direct quotations, represented in this chapter, are extracts from the semi-structured interview notes. They are comprised of what was recorded by hand by me during an interview or written by the participant. They are verified factual accounts of what was said by the participants and are represented here in order to illustrate a specific response to a question or to further illustrate the context of a theme (Morgan and Smircick, 1980). Some of the quotations are lengthy. They include the full textual fabric of what was said; to have reduced it would have superimposed my own interpretation on its intention (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996). The nature of the organisation - private, public or not-for-profit - and the role of the speaker,

are noted in order to provide relevant context to individual comments but anonymized so that participants are not readily identifiable within this study (Sayer, 1992).

5.1.1 Recruitment and Access to Participants

The challenges in getting this study underway made the research process more difficult than had originally been envisaged. Section 4.1.1 made reference to the difficulties of recruiting participants for this study. Part of the reason for this was in recruiting participants who were prepared to be interviewed and to have their interview responses recorded. Some individuals expressed that they found it difficult to discuss aspects of their partnership work. Reasons for this ranged from: ‘in case it gets back and makes it difficult for us to be trusted again’ to ‘I don’t have the headspace to be able to distance myself far enough to get a clear perspective at the moment – too much going on.’ These were not unusual responses to encounter at the time this research commenced in 2008/9, as there were a significant number of pressures and tensions on individuals and their organisations. These originated primarily from the uncertainty that surrounded local and regional funding initiatives. These were exacerbated by the increasing level of global economic uncertainty that had been developing since 2007/8. These ‘pressures’ were not exclusively economic in nature. The contexts in which participants were operating at the time had ‘head winds’ coming from several directions; some of which have been alluded to in the review of the literature around partnership presented in Chapter Two. The findings and discussion chapters will highlight the nature of these ‘head winds’ and their relevance to this study.

Participants were recruited from a purposeful sample; after my first attempt to recruit participants had experienced a number of limiting factors which have been addressed in the

previous chapter. However, the process reflected the difficulty, at that time, in engaging smaller VCOs in contributing to the process of researching their own practice. As the sample size had grown larger than I had originally intended, it felt like an over-compensation for not having been able to recruit more VCOs into the sample. However, it also facilitated an opportunity to elicit the perspectives from a more differentiated (Robson, 1993) but also a suitable sample, and to contribute towards the triangulation of this study's data (Rice and Ezzy, 1999). The sample of respondents also had implications for the logistics of carrying out the semi-structured interviews. This was a practical implication that I had not appreciated at the time of recruiting. It was due to the geographical location of respondents across the North West and the challenges that work timetables precipitated for arranging to meet. It was also impacted on by the extended timeframe for one researcher, me, having to travel in order to interview twenty-five individuals.

In Chapter Five and Chapter Six, a series of common themes are presented which were uncovered through the data coding process of this research. They will be addressed in each of the following sub-sections and they will provide the basis for the analysis that will be presented in Chapter Seven.

5.1.2 Identifying and addressing issues

What was identified as constituting an 'issue' or a 'potential problem' was identified as elements or dynamics that respondents were aware of but were thought to not require immediate action (Atkinson et al, 2007). They were not necessarily viewed as negative in nature but were viewed as having the potential to impact on what they were doing. One respondent expressed this succinctly as:

“I separate professional factors into two groups: those I know exist, but haven’t as yet caused me enough concern to act on or to challenge them, and those that I absolutely need to do something about. You can’t challenge everything at once. You have to choose which of your issues has priority at that moment in time and address those first” (Housing Association, manager).

There were issues that respondents identified as being ongoing and were identified as requiring action periodically. One respondent described his process of relabeling an ‘issue’ to a ‘challenge’ as ‘code red’. He felt that when he labelled a topic in this way he needed to act on it by addressing it in the most appropriate way:

“ ‘Code red’ is when I know that I need to challenge something on my list of issues – such as challenging why I am included for some meetings but ignored for others which I find out about later. It gets to a point where you have to challenge or put up and shut up” (VCO, trainer).

All VCOs/TSOs believed that they would not be able to sustain their existing level of service if they were not able to secure a sustainable level of core funding. They felt that they would have to either ‘shrink’ their existing provision or close their services altogether if they did not engage in collaborative activities within their regions. The ability to attract funding was felt to be closely associated with a willingness to work in partnership with other agencies. The housing associations, the national charity, the largest of the two social enterprises and the support agency, felt that they too would experience the need to contract, or to restructure part of their provision, as a result of ‘financial constraints. However, it was clear that, due to the diversity of their financial resource capacity, that this would not precipitate a ‘make or break situation’ for them at the time of these interviews. It was also

expressed that the services they would be able to offer might be undermined by the lack of input from other training providers if some of those providers were no longer able to deliver them. Participants felt that this, in turn, would impact negatively on them being able to address the diverse learning needs within their areas and have significant implications for learners.

5.1.3 Learning and skills: satellites versus centralized provision

One respondent, a manager from a small charity, described the pressures she felt under to meet the learning and skills needs of an increasing number of long-term unemployed men. They were being referred to her from different local agencies; some of whom were closing or reducing what they offered. She acknowledged the benefits of working with other local and regional groups as a means of sharing knowledge, skills and resources. Furthermore, she accepted that because they were able to work with such a wide array of providers, that her organisation had been able to access and secure different sources of funding and was able to continue to operate. Participants were in broad agreement that working collaboratively had the potential to deliver innovative, directed and sustainable learning and skills development.

It was felt that working from a position of shared objectives, facilitated more flexibility to respond quickly to the needs of local people and to be able to provide more specific and appropriate support to particular groups of learners. One of the key strengths of partnership working was identified as being the flexibility and ‘localism’ of a multi-agency approach that embraced; not only the experience and knowledge-base of local VCOs and TSOs, but also the shared objectives towards learning provision. This was identified as being of

importance to underpinning social cohesion and inclusivity within their areas. It was viewed by one respondent as an extension of 'trust': "I think 'locating learning locally' should be our mantra as you are investing in your local TSOs, which you do generally know someone from" (VCO Charity, manager/volunteer). One mainstream (college) educational provider identified 'localism' as being a problem in their own recruitment:

"When provision is located away from areas where there is a clear sense of community and identity, recruitment can be a problem with certain courses. Even though we are only a couple of miles down the road, we are just not *local enough* for some learners to feel comfortable enough to attend" (College, tutor).

This highlighted a number of issues relating to what some participants viewed as a movement towards more 'centralising and mainstreaming' of learning and skills development. Some respondents expressed their concerns very forcibly:

"We do all the [bl...dy] development work within the community; facilitate a successful programme of taster courses and ten-weekers; put all that slog into recruitment; generate the interest - all in the name of partnership-working with local mainstream providers *and then* the local college put on *exactly* the same courses in the September; don't even tell us, recruit VCO providers from outside the immediate area and wonder why trust is increasingly an issue. I had to find out in their list of courses when it fell out of the local newspaper (VCO, manager).

This comment epitomised many such 'charged' comments. These represented the strength of feeling that some respondents expressed towards other providers within their area. It also highlighted what many had cited as a more competitive environment for them to

operate in. Others felt that the ‘environment’ in which they now worked, as VCOs, left them feeling depleted. One respondent’s comment illustrates this sentiment clearly:

“I feel *under-mined*, *under-* valued and *under-respected*...add that to *under-funded*, *over-stretched* and *over-looked* and you have a picture that is *under-represented*. No wonder *nobody* is asking searching questions of VCOs who are reported to be operating ‘*under the radar*’ ... how [f....ing] patronising. If they actually got the *real* answers they might actually *understand*” (VCO, treasurer/volunteer).

Participants also mentioned the importance of building on the achievements that already existed between agencies and were thought to be working well. There was a positive commitment to the idea of enhancing partnerships by developing more ‘joined-up’, complementary delivery between providers but concern was expressed that, sometimes, the ‘joined-up’ sometimes resulted in ‘torn-apart’. There were suggestions that the frequency with which this occurred indicated that there were issues that needed identifying and resolving within some of their local partnership-working arrangements. When asked to explain, the participants did not always wish to expand on this further. More experienced participants felt that because they had worked in a diversity of inter-agency partnerships, it had perhaps facilitated more confidence in being able to identify, address and resolve issues that might undermine working relationships. Others expressed that the more experienced partners needed to be more proactive in their support of new or inexperienced members and felt that not nearly enough attention was being levied in this respect:

“We need to build the confidence of less experienced partners so that we can develop *more equitable partnerships built on shared principles and mutual trust*”
(Housing Association, manager).

5.2 Exploring the constituents of organizational practice

Whilst I expected that participants might provide a range of perspectives, due to their different backgrounds, working experiences and the nature of the organisations they belonged to, the interview data was far less clearly differentiated and more nuanced. When asked to expand on their backgrounds, it was apparent that most respondents had experienced working migration which had often encompassed working for different sector-types of organisation.

5.2.1 Roles and the art of working in partnership

The findings highlighted several issues concerning working in partnership and indicated two broad areas of consensus amongst respondents. Firstly, working collaboratively was perceived as providing obvious benefits for learners and for the organisation that provided the learning opportunities. These were of the “putting the ‘collaborative’ back into ‘partnership’” (VCO, funding officer) variety. Secondly, they were concerned with identifying factors that contributed towards facilitating positive outcomes and those that were believed to undermine successful outcomes to working in partnership. Some of which were perceived as polarities in the opinions of respondents to the same partnership experience. For example, a higher resource capacity partner providing suitable accommodation for a series of workshops to take place: “whilst at the same time trying to change an already agreed programme of delivery” (Social enterprise, trainer). In general, respondents were positive about their experiences of partnership-working but expressed criticism of the increased external pressures to continually engage in them. Some expressed their concern at the relatively uncritical, and unquestioning, position towards

partnership-working and counted themselves amongst those that did not always feel comfortable being “the only one in the room to challenge” (SME local, manager).

Participant roles, and their levels of responsibility, varied due to the nature and scale of their organisational activities. They all worked in partnerships that facilitated learning and skills development opportunities within local community areas. For some, it represented the main service they offered. For others, it represented part of what their organisation did. The broad spectrum of vocational and non-vocational provision, encompassed introductory workshops at level one to level three and courses in: literacy, numeracy, language development, information technology, craft skills, mentoring, learn to sing, horticulture and start your own business. The diverse list continued. Often, responsibilities extended into other geographical areas. These facilitated projects that resulted in networking opportunities over wider areas than had historically been the case for those organisations. This was viewed as “being necessary in order to secure opportunities for our services and to facilitate diverse and interesting opportunities for learners and practitioners to link into other networks of opportunities” (Charity national, manager). However, it also precipitated non-costed, work commitments which were viewed as being “leveraged disproportionately on some organisations more than others” (Charity national, manager).

Participants described working in partnerships at different levels of influence within their locality. Many felt that it was only by working with a range of local stakeholders that more appropriate and effective solutions could be found for local issues. ‘Local issues’ embraced an exceptionally broad canvas and were dependent on the demographics of each area. They included learning and skills initiatives for long-term unemployed men, ex-offenders, young people attending pupil-referral units, the recently retired, clients of mental health facilities, migrants and asylum-seekers. Many felt that there were a number of factors that endeared

partners to the notion of working in partnership as being generally 'a good idea' if it worked well for all partners. However, many accepted that it could also be "a deeply flawed and messy process and too much about whose 'top dog' and can get the last word in" (Charity, trainer).

Each interviewee was asked to describe their motivations for taking up their present roles. They were asked to explain the expectations they had for colleagues and partners, and to explore how they measured the success or failure of working collaboratively. Many of those involved in this research claimed that they took their present jobs because of the opportunities it afforded them to work within their local community: building skills, confidence and facilitating enterprising initiatives. However, for some respondents, their decision was targeted more towards advancement within their organisation, or within the type of work they were doing, and the opportunities it may precipitate. Several participants were clear about their career pathways and were already 'looking at another job' or 'applying for something else with better opportunities' or 'looking for another three year fixed appointment'. One respondent, felt that their best prospect for the future was not to work for a small VCO; citing as their reason that it was "too difficult to get anything done without having to discuss it to death" (Charity small, trainer). Another cited "the enormous financial uncertainty" as their reason for considering an entirely different line of work (Faith national, community liaison). Others expressed that it was because they were seeking "like-minded thinkers with an altruistic streak" (Housing Association, community development) that they were drawn to work in the third sector or to work within their local authority liaising with local agencies. They believed they could achieve more. However, what was a recursive theme throughout all the interviews was how the actions of organisations were underpinned by issues and challenges that were precipitated by

financial uncertainty and increased demand for their services. This will be addressed in the next section.

5.2.2 Financial uncertainty and increased demand

All respondents expressed their commitment to the idea of working in partnership. Most felt that it worked well for most of the time within their local settings of known providers; many of whom had built up their working relationships over time. There was agreement, that a range of stakeholders working together on local issues, through the delivery of workshops and skills-training, benefitted the community and provided a more sustainable ‘pool’ of shared experiences and resources. This was felt to contribute towards building-up local capacity and was viewed as “instrumental in enabling more initiatives to be considered” (Local Authority, community liaison). However, most respondents accepted that some organisations were “just better resourced in terms of human and physical resources” (Infrastructure support, trainer). The implication of this being that it placed some local, less well-resourced organisations at a disadvantage when bidding for funding and/or working in partnership against better-resourced national organisations:

“New organisations quite often gets shed loads of money thrown at them over a three year funding period. They often deliver little in that time, promise a lot, go to the wall at the end of the three year period and we have to pick-up the pieces they leave behind in terms of provision. Result: funders now look less-than-favorably on local groups” (Tenant and Resident, Chair).

The issue around the impact of funding was viewed as being one of the explanations as to why there had been an increase in the requirement from funders for local groups to work together more frequently. As one respondent expressed: “Working in partnership is certainly not viewed in our area as a panacea for *everything* and it is certainly *not* unproblematic *but* working together, especially for smaller groups, can certainly strengthen their hand in terms of attracting money to their services” (VCO, manager).

The current funding climate (2008-2011) was viewed, by all respondents, as facilitating ‘significant challenges’ and ‘getting worse’. Many felt that now it was more important than ever to “work together more effectively and more efficiently” (Local Authority, development manager). It was viewed as increasingly more difficult to access or retain funding for future projects. Some identified that the extra work, that applying for funding was precipitating on them, was creating enough pressures to justify “just apply for anything and everything” (VCO, funding officer). This approach was felt to be at odds with how some organisations wanted to operate and they identified that they thought it made them look like a ‘desperate case’. One respondent (Social enterprise, manager) was annoyed, when the response she received from a regional charity was “you must be desperate if you are coming to us for money”. She agreed. They did not receive the grant. Both organisations had previously worked together.

One respondent (VCO, administrator) expressed her frustration:

“I now have to deal with funding grants that may, or may not, have a service level agreement attached to them. I have also commissioned work where we are approached to deliver particular types of work which is paid for via grants. Last week I was involved with the submission of a competitive tendering contract. Oh, and it has

been suggested that we could take a *loan* at a competitive rate to reduce our overdraft whilst waiting for ‘all the other money to come in’. *No wonder I’m dizzy.*”

This may, or may not, fully represent the ‘exceptional’ end of the finance scale for some VCO/TSOs. However, it does indicate the level of financial complexity that some organisations have to embrace as part of what they do professionally. Whilst this is not necessarily an unknown experience for many third sector agencies, what was pointed out by several respondents across the organisational spectrum, is the frequency and the level to which they have to do it is. For some, despite examining all aspects of their financial position, in terms of income and expenditure and making a number of changes, they still felt that; despite their best efforts to improve their financial position, it remained precarious at best. In the experience of one VCO manager:

“taking the word ‘enterprise’ and spinning it, we still struggle to secure a sustainable level of income from that ‘yarn’ *despite* our *very* best efforts and our commitment to a broad range of collaborative initiatives”.

Another respondent, from a small, local charity, commented that reductions in government grant funding had resulted in them contracting their activities back to what they were in the early 1990’s. Although they were disappointed about the reduction in external funding, and the uncertainty it may have on their ability to sustain their present level of activities, they thought that they had become too reliant on it. They felt that they “did a lot with a little” (Faith organisation, manager). All of the smaller organisations felt that they had had to intensify their efforts over the past two years as they had lost significant portions of their core funding and a mixture of small grants and donations.

In general, respondents felt that it was only due to the commitment of all staff and volunteers to “keeping going; keeping the doors open” (VCO, manager) that had necessitated that they look at other income-generating opportunities in greater detail. In terms of motivation, one respondent felt that they would have to “turn into a for-profit venture, just to keep going” (VCO, treasurer). As one respondent (VCO, trainer) expressed:

“I have felt that for some years, prior to the economic downturn associated with 2007/8, the highly directive nature of the funding climate had necessitated prescriptive practices regarding how training *was*, and still *is*, delivered and the outcomes that *were* and *are*, required.”

Another respondent (Housing Association, community liaison), mirrored this sentiment but added that he felt that if the global financial challenges had not happened that “we would still be staring down the ‘barrel of a gun’ and in the same position. All that money sloshing around in the 1990’s was bound to dry up.” What was expressed by most participants was concern over what impact an increasingly more competitive environment would have on the decisions organisations made and the relationships they facilitated as a consequence. For some, the “whole pick and mix” (National company, community link manager) of organisations coming together in partnerships was viewed as fundamentally wrong if it was driven by the wrong reasons. According to another respondent (Social enterprise, manager):

“*Some* funding requirements do make you feel that you are *not* in control; that you can’t deliver a training initiative in the area where it should be delivered to the

groups that should be on it because of specifics in the funding criteria. Then I feel that we are dancing to someone else's tune."

This exploration has highlighted a number of significant issues and challenges. For some respondents, the notion of having to facilitate more 'creative [financial] strategies' when not only applying for funding or grants but in implementing them, was viewed as "precipitating a 'strategic tightrope' of uncertainty" (VCO, Administrator). When prompted to qualify what he meant by this comment, he explained that his organisation had become more adept with their costings but still put on courses within the parameters of the funding.

Other issues that were highlighted by respondents as creating 'financial challenges', especially for small organisations, were the implications of 'delivery costs' and 'full cost recovery' on funded training initiatives. For some organisations, the challenge was in being able to recover the full cost of putting on training and skills provision. Some of these calculations were made more complicated due to multi-agency involvement and the use of different premises. As one respondent expressed:

"It is an aspect of my work that has become *more*, not *less* demanding in the past few years. We are not looking to *make* money, just not to *lose* it" (Charity, trainer).

When asked how she dealt with this challenge practically, the respondent explained that sometimes projects funded from different 'pots of money' shared 'back office admin'. This was seen as a way of facilitating training where the funding for a training course was "limited to the costs for delivering that course and no more" (VCO, funding officer). The majority of the cost could be the training provider's invoiced fees for delivery. Sometimes,

the training provider would have to include an administrative component to their fees and absorb some of the ‘back office’ administrative requirements; especially in the case where restrictive funding criteria did not allow full cost recovery for the voluntary organisation putting the training course on. This was not viewed as anything unusual but “part of being creative with financial resources” (SME, trainer).

All the not-for-profit organisations and public sector agencies believed that, over recent years, many local organisations; including many in this sample, had been pursuing ‘shrinking funding opportunities’. It was recognized that part of this reduction could be explained by an increase in the duplication of delivery in some areas of adult provision:

“Some of the provision that is *guaranteed* to bring them [learners] into the centre, such as diy and craft courses, are *very* popular but relatively expensive to put on. However, they *do* recruit well but there’s few of us offering them now”
(VCO, Centre Manager).

However, whilst this was viewed as an effective way of engaging potential learners, it was also understood to precipitate problems where there were similar courses being run in the same area; resulting in a duplication of local provision. There was recognition that avenues of funding both identified and addressed this. This was in terms of the restrictions imposed by different forms of funding on what could be funded, by whom and within which area. A number of significant changes were precipitated as a direct result of financial constraints. Some organisations had to close. Others formed new legal entities, such as Community Interest Companies (CIC’s) or entered into mergers with similar types of organisations to avoid duplication of provision and to make ‘back office savings’. Others had changed their status and become a registered charity or a social enterprise whilst some had facilitated

new networks of organisations with enhanced joint purchasing power. Participants felt that there was a real danger in ‘the present economic climate of austerity’, of precipitating a ‘dog eat dog’ environment of ‘chasing scraps of funding to survive’. Some felt that there was a long term danger of their organisational identity being compromised in the drive to seek funding. It was expressed, by several respondents, that the issue over funding had the potential to “homogenise service distinctness so that we all look the same or even merge to become bigger versions of ourselves” (VCO, trainer). Another respondent felt that:

“The more you work together, the more chance you have of creating opportunities and developing services and, of course, securing funding. Funders increasingly want tangible outcomes; less of the fuzzy ‘people felt better for attending this course’ result and more of ‘they gained a qualification, a job, started volunteering’”
(Local Authority, manager).

However, there were also those who felt that their negative attitude towards partnership working was as a result of ‘having to do it’. Others identified issues around having partners who were perceived as having an aversion to “actually doing anything other than talking” (Tenant and Resident, Chair) or described their experiences as “a good initiative spoilt by personalities and petty squabbling” (School, community liaison). One respondent was highly critical of working in partnership:

‘Do they think that partnership is an acronym for the tooth fairy and that all you have to do is to put your wish under your pillow and the next morning all the work has *magically* been done?’ (VCO charity, funding officer).

The notion of change was prevalent in the conversations with all participants. The idea of ‘partnership’, for some, was expressed as potentially ‘transformative’ for their organisation and the wider range of initiatives that they were able to provide to local residents in their areas. Others felt that the idea of ‘transforming’ was a more “behind the scenes activity that involved only a few of the larger third sector organisations, larger businesses and all the public agencies” (SME, trainer). At the time of collecting data, there was a very strong sense of change ahead; some of which was beginning to be understood in terms of the changing financial context already discussed. One participant, from a housing association (community liaison), summed up the changes that had taken place since 2007/8. His organisation had discussed how it had changed what they offered and how they would be operating in the future in their collaborative activities with third sector agencies:

“We, as a housing association, *do not* and *cannot* justify spending on community-based projects working with third sector groups on greening the streets, community gardens, money into different types of local training like we used to in the late nineties. We *have to* look a lot harder at *how* we spend our money and, to be frank, our line has now become a little more hardened and ‘enforcement-orientated’; a lot more *hard* outputs rather than some of the previous softer outcomes. We have to be able to demonstrate a more direct link between what we *put* into local communities and what we can *measure* we get out. That is the hard, brutal fact.”

The nature of increasing funding constraints, and the difficulties associated with accessing different sources of financing, was seen as a reason to overlook, what one respondent termed, “personal differences as we are not always in the position to entertain the ‘luxury’ of choosing our partners” (Social Enterprise, manager). There was an awareness, amongst respondents; especially those who had been working in TSO/VCO partnerships for several

years, that there had been shifts in the perception of what individuals ‘brought’ to partnership arrangements. This was both in terms of expectations, attitudes and values. One respondent described this as being: “too focused on self-interest and ‘what’s in it for me, my organisation’, ‘what can you do for me’ *rather than* what can *we* do for *each other*...unfortunately *some* local groups have *fully*-immersed themselves in a business model of self-interest and bad practice” (VCO manager). One of the recurrent themes throughout all the interviews; manifesting itself in different guises was that of ‘trust’. The next section presents the findings related to trust.

5.2.3 The importance of trust: inter-personal and inter-agency

The most frequently cited recurrent theme throughout all interview responses was that of ‘trust’. The use of the term in interviews was variably expressed as ‘trust’, ‘mutual trust’, ‘mistrust’, ‘shared understanding’ and ‘confidence in working together’. The responses suggested that ‘trust’ was viewed as central to the working relationships of this study’s participants. There was a strong indication from participants, that mutual trust determined the outcomes of working together and was viewed as central to the success, or failure, of many projects. One respondent felt that: “Trust is the ‘glue’ that makes the difference to any project – when it’s *not* there, everything is impoverished” (Faith Organisation support worker).

The increase in opportunities to work together was felt to have resulted in more participants becoming aware of issues concerning the idea of ‘trust’ towards some of their partners. This was viewed in two ways. Firstly, it was viewed as providing the opportunity to build stronger local relationships through collaboration. Secondly, but of no less

importance, it was viewed as facilitating more opportunities to improve communication, understanding and respect between different agencies. This in turn was felt to contribute positively within the wider context of local communities as local groups responded more positively to each other. Participants felt that there needed to be a stage in their working relationships that accepted that a level of trust had been built up between organisations. They also identified that there were layers that related to trust between colleagues which was on a 'personal level' and trust between their organisation that was on an 'impersonal level'. One respondent described this rather poetically as:

“A conduit of trust needs to have an existence of its own and not just based on individual relationships but ultimately that is the source it flows *from* and informs *everything* else” (Infrastructure support, trainer).

One of the issues that was viewed, by all respondents, as having the potential to undermine trusting collaborative relationships and was seen as 'becoming a problem', was the retention of staff and volunteers. Most respondents felt that, provided enough 'cache' had been invested in local partnerships, the relationship between organisations could cope with staff leaving and arriving without trust being totally fragmented and having to 'start all over again'. An increase in newly-formed, locally-based organisations with different ways of working; an increase in competitive tendering and accountability measures, were viewed as some of the key factors that were bringing into questions the notion of trust between individuals and between organisations. One respondent differentiated between levels of trust: “ Whilst we may levy feelings of trust towards an organisation, based on its perceived values and their actions, it is *ultimately* the people who run it who are the frontline for building and maintaining that much valued 'trust'” (College, community trainer).

Participants differentiated between trust which they ‘viewed as spontaneous’ and ‘trust which they felt was generated over a time period of working together’ (Hardy et al, 1998). There was increasing uncertainty associated with ‘trust’ and part of that perception was explained in terms of the often short-term nature of many learning and skills training funded initiatives that were experienced as:

“thrusting people together with ‘history’ who *really* shouldn’t be working together.....but necessity often creates strange ‘bed fellows’” (VCO volunteer).

However, despite previously expressed ‘negative relationships’, respondents felt that they had ‘little or no choice’ but to enter into working relationships with individuals and/or organisations they had ‘trust issues’ with. Participants expressed awareness of the implications that some working relationships may have had on learners. They also stressed that they felt their learners may have become aware of “the stresses and strains that might manifest themselves between trainers and organisations with issues of trust” (Charity, manager). Many felt that it had impacted on the learning environment in a negative way and felt that it was impossible to eliminate “the personal from the professional” (SME, manager). One manager of a social enterprise, explained their strategy for addressing, and resolving, the issues around trust that they were experiencing within their collaborative activities:

“We were getting fed up to the back teeth of discussing ideas at meetings; only to see that *another* agency had gone off and got funding for exactly the same thing. We decided to develop our consultancy side, offer stand-alone training packages and approach the business sector. We intend to commission, develop and initiate our

own skills programmes. I certainly know which organisations I *won't* be approaching (Social Enterprise, manager).

Emphasis was often placed on 'mutual' and the importance of "an all partner process as it's an 'all or nothing concept'" (Housing Association, community liaison officer). Many of the organisations represented in this study, expressed that they had experienced working relationships built on trust with local TSOs/VCOs, statutory agencies, private businesses and mainstream educational providers. These were within their local communities and they felt that they had built up excellent working relationships, built on mutual trust and respect, but felt that they could not take it for granted. "You need to be aware of the factors which might undermine it [relationships] and be prepared to take steps to prevent that from happening", a VCO manager cautioned. Many respondents expressed that they felt they trusted some partners at the outset of their working relationships but felt that it was only when they had worked together for some time, that they could identify if trust in them was "fleeting or real" (Charity, trainer).

The existence of 'personal agendas'; that might not coalesce with those of the group and an overt focus on the needs of their own organisation, were believed to instantly undermine trust in the relationship between all partners. One housing association participant believed that some of their partners started from a position of mistrust towards them as an organisation because of their size, resources and influence. He felt that some groups, he had worked with, had not thought of the idea of the consequences of trust or erosion of trust, as flowing between partners in two directions. He summed up his sentiment:

"It (trust) underpins any good relationship; either personal or professional. I find it inspires me to give of myself more fully; I feel more spontaneous. I *know* I have to

work at convincing partners that we are seeking a 'win-win' situation for all. I *know* that sometimes that message is hard to get across when you are seen as 'the dominant partner' - well resourced, plush offices, funding, a wealth of sub-contractors to choose from....can one really wonder why trust is not spontaneous but has to be earned again and again when some partners start from the position of 'mistrust'" (Housing Association, community liaison).

Several difficulties were noted by respondents concerning their experiences at meetings with their collaborative partners. One respondent (Charity small, trainer) had attended a meeting with local VCOs, a local authority and two local private businesses. The focus of their discussion had been on how to encourage local unemployed young men to attend skills development initiatives in their area. As a result of attending the meeting, the trainer felt that there had been "evidence of a strong thread of previous conversations" having already taken place between two of the members. This had not included everyone and it was obvious, to the respondent, that decisions had already been reached. This resulted in the meeting feeling like it had already taken place prior to her attendance with 'no prior consultation'. This had precipitated an argument amongst partners at the meeting; with two members storming out. Another respondent shared a similar experience:

"A farce and a façade....there was nothing I could quite point to and say that wasn't right but I sensed that there was a layer of superficiality about the way we were speaking that was too polite and a little too controlling. We were meant to be there to discuss what was *going* to happen, but I felt that that conversation had already taken place *before* we arrived" (Tenant and Resident Association volunteer).

Both respondents expressed their growing concern regarding the increasing requirements for them to work with agencies; to share information and resources and then to possibly be competing for the same source of funding only a short time later. All respondents felt that it was not only very challenging to build relationships, but also the issues of sustaining them added a layer of complexity; especially due to the fragmented working arrangements. Participants often felt that the issue of trust had become such an issue with some providers, that they tried to “orchestrate ways *not* to work together” (VCO volunteer). When asked to expand on how this was achieved in practice, the participant did not wish to expand further. The issue of trust between individuals was perceived as being a critical factor in establishing relationships that could be developed when there was a core of trust and an open level of communication between all partners:

“My own professional experiences have borne out time and time again that, as abstract as the term ‘trust’ is, most of us recognize the presence, or the absence, of it from our interactions with colleagues. It manifests itself in increased openness between partners, a genuine liking for that person, a sense that you can count on them to play their part in delivery, an expectation that what is discussed stays with the group and isn’t shared amongst those outside the group” (Housing Association manager).

Participants identified trust as both influencing the nature of working arrangements and, in turn, influencing their initial formation. Those who had experienced a history of working in partnership, admitted that they believed it provided them with insights into the “mechanics of partnership relationships” (Local Authority, community liaison). Others commented that, they too had experienced a significant period of time working in partnership but often described their experiences as ‘very challenging’ and ‘peppered with undermining comments and disagreement’. Others expressed that working in partnership

had facilitated more understanding and awareness between partners; many of whom had been operating in the locality for years. However, it had not always resulted in a more natural interaction without the impetus of having to work together to secure funding or to share resources. Many thought that this would take longer to achieve now, in the present climate of ‘funding austerity’, before they could feel “more open, more ready to participate and more engaged in the whole process” (Charity, trainer). Another recurring theme, in the findings, was that of risk. The next section presents the findings on risk.

5.2.4 The significance of risk in collaborative partnerships

Because of their professional roles, some participants were required to commission training initiatives with local training providers. This was from ‘for-profit’ or from ‘not-for profit’ large and small organisations. This was precipitated as a result of the commissioning agency having already acquired the funding to put on a set of courses or workshops. Alternatively, it was as a result of an organisation having been awarded a grant on the basis of being able to deliver a particular project. The majority of the time, it was felt that other agency involvement was present in some form; either in an advisory or practical capacity or both. Sometimes, the collaborative activities were restricted to the simple sharing of resources such as the use of premises, which was sometimes noted as that agencies ‘partnership contribution’ to a project. Other occasions precipitated formalized contractual arrangements between several agencies with specific roles allocated to each. The more formalized contracts were viewed as becoming more frequent. However, more informal collaborative arrangements between agencies, was still the main way of working together. Whilst it was viewed as a common practice, several VCOs began to express their concerns regarding their exposure to ‘risk’.

This raises one of the key themes recurrent in the interviews, especially from smaller organisations: the issue of ‘risk’. It was felt that the importance of its implications for all organisations was not addressed sufficiently in many collaborative arrangements. The notion of a ‘business as usual approach’ for VCOs and TSO’s, was felt to operate on a ‘taken-for-granted’ basis because that’s the way they had been operating: on trust. However, many respondents identified that way of working in their own practices as “no longer being an acceptable practice” (SME, manager) as they felt it left them “under-financed and often under-insured in terms of our exposure to the potential financial penalties that can ensue from delivering anything that involves people and property” (VCO, administrator). One respondent (VCO, manager) summarised his own recent experience:

“I spoke to our insurers the other day and, quite by chance, started talking about how difficult things had been for us and that we would need to reduce our costs and that our insurance cover was on the list to question. He told me that *far* from it reducing, we would need to *increase* our level of public liability and professional indemnity cover as we were now seen as a riskier venture which is too exposed to market forces. I was shocked but it made me realize that the idea of ‘risk’, that we had not really considered, needed considering.”

This comment reflects the experiences of several respondents in what had been described as “risk-averse conversations with insurers” (Charity national, manager). Taken together, these dynamics were felt to indicate a number of changes within the elements that constitute the operational ‘landscape’ for organisations. The next sub-section discusses the findings related to the themes of ‘identity’ and ‘autonomy’.

5.2.5 The challenges to retaining identity and autonomy

The findings precipitated the themes of ‘identity’ and ‘autonomy’ in response to questions that encouraged respondents to explore how they viewed their personal and organisational development over the next few years. Some respondents expressed that they had not felt a ‘great need’ to question what one respondent termed: “the ‘who, what and where’ of organisational identity” (Charity, trainer). It was felt that they had ‘always been clear’ in their understanding until recently. One respondent felt strongly that what had been referred to as the ‘distinctive identify of the voluntary sector’, was now being eroded and she suggested that:

“Turning partnership working into a ‘high art form’ has been good for us in terms of opportunities, since becoming a registered charity, but what *does* concern me is what I am witnessing as a slow, steady, insidious erosion of the autonomy and the distinctive identity and character of many smaller organisations, such as ours as we try to mould ourselves into whatever we need to be in order to win contracts, favours and funding” (Charity, manager).

This was a common sentiment expressed by VCO/TSOs. The larger charity, represented in the sample, felt that they had not felt the same challenges to their identity as they felt they were ‘a well-established and recognized national ‘brand’’. They believed that they had experienced a drop in income due to the economic downturn that had precipitated a need to review all their activities and to renew how they presented themselves. They also accepted that smaller, more local VCOs/TSOs, who did not have such a diverse income base as they did (i.e. donations, gift aid, legacies, merchandise, consultancy) were, therefore, often

wholly dependent on funding from government agencies and that this might precipitate a situation:

“There is a very real and present danger of, not only ‘mission drift’, but also reduced autonomy and ‘morphed’ identity. I believe these are now very real dangers; especially for smaller organisations in the present financial climate. This is how the voluntary sector is becoming somewhat ‘schizophrenic’ and questioning who and what they now are. It is a very worrying trend” (Charity national, manager).

This was borne out by all respondents from VCOs who felt that they had modified aspects of their ‘organisational dynamics’ in order to ‘stay afloat’. When pressed to expand on the term ‘organisational dynamics’, it was felt that it covered “all the compromises we have had to make in terms of our values, beliefs and commitments towards other organisations, projects and the decisions we have made” (VCO, manager). Another respondent summed up what had been almost whispered to him recently at a meeting:

“The indication was clear to ‘fit in’, ‘tone down a little’ as you ‘make yourself come across as difficult because you question’. In other words, ‘keep your head down’ (Social enterprise, trainer).

Respondents expressed their concern that the pattern of coercion within meetings was not uncommon and was sometimes viewed as being so subtle that it was only after they had left a meeting that they had realized that they had spent most of it trying to explain the outcomes of their project.

These narratives have demonstrated a commitment to collaborative working; with a diversity of approaches, skills-set, resources and funding arrangements viewed as contributing towards local capacity-building. It has also highlighted, for some participants, a perception of a loss of capacity. This has been in terms of maintaining a clearly differentiated identity and concerns related to feelings of being ‘conscripted into working arrangements’ and ‘not feeling able to object’. Providing a broader base of skills and learning opportunities with shared objectives, and a collective commitment to improving local outcomes for learners, was viewed as a cornerstone to building and maintaining trust between groups.

The findings presented in this chapter have highlighted what was identified by respondents as issues and challenges to collaborative arrangements. Problems were perceived to have been caused by public, private and third sector organisations in the delivery of joint initiatives. One common criticism was of partners who were seen as being reluctant to “fully-engage with the ‘doing’ part of a project and prefer to focus more on the ‘talking’ part of partnership-working” (Charity, trainer). On other occasions, issues and challenges had been precipitated by a lack of human and resource capacity from some voluntary and community partners. This might be due to not having enough suitably trained staff, premises being unavailable or unsuitable, lack of materials due to delays in the arrival of the funding or public sector partners not contributing their expertise or time effectively to a project. It may have been due to a local business reducing its financial and material resource contribution at the last minute. All these factors, and more, were viewed as creating tensions between partners. Problems were caused by the late arrival of the funds to deliver courses. This resulted in financial contingency plans having to be rushed into place so as to not delay the training from starting, losing venues, learners or the tutors. In an extreme case, one respondent lost the premises to host a course, the tutor and the learners

due to a significant delay in the grant funding arriving; despite assurances that they would. All of these examples indicate a challenging and complex process of engagement which, for the majority of the time, managed to produce results but necessitated the need to resolve issue after issue and challenge after challenge in order to do so.

5.3 Summary

The findings presented in Chapter Five suggest a varied picture that is not simply explained in terms of organisational differences. The aspirations and motivations of individuals, agencies, and the broader professional contexts in which they take place, provide a partial explanation. The findings from the analysis of the data present a complementary, and at times, a contradictory ‘kaleidoscope’ of perspectives, insights and experiences from participants.

This chapter has provided an overview of the findings from the semi-structured interviews, the process through which access was negotiated to participants and the key messages from the research. One of the most significant outcomes is how partners are motivated towards creating opportunities for learning within their own community geographies, despite some of the negative experiences from across the organisational spectrum. The themes identified in this chapter will be developed further in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

Changes in Partnership Working

6.1 Introduction

This is the second of the two chapters that presents the findings from this study. It presents the findings concerning how participants thought their professional activities had been affected by their experiences of working collaboratively. This chapter develops the themes presented in Chapter Five by exploring the opportunities and constraints faced by agencies who undertake to work collaboratively. It relates the findings to the themes presented in Chapter Five. The previous chapter highlighted the significance to participants of building collaborative relationships with other organisations that were built and maintained on trust. They also identified the role of risk as a significant, and increasingly more relevant, aspect of their work in partnership. This section presents the findings from the interview questions that explored these themes further in relation to the decision-making processes and inter-organisational dynamics of practice

6.2 Changing organizational activities

Whilst a range of factors were identified as ‘issues and challenges’ for respondents, they coalesced around four key themes: mutual trust and shared objectives, identity and autonomy. Whilst identified as separate themes, they were nonetheless often discussed in tandem. Establishing shared objectives was viewed as operating on different levels: for the project, for the organisation, for the individual learner and for the future. Often, the notion of ‘shared objectives’ was vocalized as a defining set of tasks that needed to be in place

and was identified as part of the underpinning ‘bedrock’ on which trust in that individual and organisation could ‘take root’. Autonomy was often linked with identity by respondents who felt that if autonomy was challenged, then identity was also. The notion that you could maintain an independent organisational identity despite the challenges presented from external monetary pressures that could challenge your ability to operate, was viewed as “disillusioned at best and naïve at worst” (Business enterprise, owner).

6.2.1 Changing relationships, changing practice

Participants identified trust and risk as key elements within the fabric of building and maintaining relationships and developing learning opportunities in collaboration. The findings indicated a dichotomy between what different participants felt constituted ‘risk’ and how they thought of it with respect to their own professional practice. The term ‘risk’ was a recurring element for all participants when discussing, what one participant termed, “the fine-grained detail of who does what and with which resources”. As the treasurer in a faith organisation, the issue had been raised on numerous occasions of how financially exposed their group was in terms of what they got paid for, the courses they delivered and the true cost of putting those courses on. It was felt that it was an issue that was largely ignored within their organisation. It was also felt to operate “on a balance between divine intervention and a big dose of sometimes misplaced trust.” In many local groups, this respondent felt that many operated on a ‘wing and a prayer’ in terms of finance and had little idea of the true costs or how to cost their provision to take into account some of the ‘risks of business’. This sentiment was expressed by several other participants regarding their observations and experiences of working with TSO/VCOs.

Participants felt that there was both the need for, and a noticeable absence of, more detailed conversations between partners that identified and addressed issues relating to risk. It was suggested that, by highlighting areas of risk in working arrangements, they could be translated into ‘recorded tangibles in the paperwork’. This was suggested as a way to limit and quantify liabilities for all partners. The first response to the term ‘risk’ focused on “the ‘who falls over, what, where and who can I sue’ – type of risk” (VCO large, manager). This highlighted a recurring theme from the interviews that differentiated respondents on the grounds of what they understood. It was not as simple as better-resourced, larger groups being more ‘clued-up’; although there was a noticeable polarity between individuals who worked within larger organisations in terms of their awareness of ‘risk’. It manifested itself in the comments that highlighted a ‘reduction in ‘exposure to risk’ or ‘minimising risk’. Whilst this was identified as ‘sensible practice for all enterprises’, some respondents cautioned that “it is not simply about reducing risk; as sensible as that undoubtedly is. It is, for some partners, about absolving their organisations of *as much* of the inherent risks that come with the territory. The issue for me is that it passes to other partners and is not shared; it’s not good practice” (VCO, manager). Knowledge of risk tended to polarise to individuals on the grounds of their responsibilities. This distinction is important as the findings indicate that not all respondents had explored ‘risk’ in any great detail and were often relying on a loose understanding of it, as indicated by this respondent’s comment:

“I only really think of ‘risk’ in terms of harm to our clients on the premises or the risk of not completing a project with the wrong partner or the consequences to *us* of insufficient funding covering all our costs” (Social enterprise, manager).

Another respondent declared that she thought:

“Many small and medium-sized third sector organisations are naively hurling towards the edge of the cliff without a parachute. So many get very little by way of anything that looks remotely like a ‘contract’ between them. It leaves them wide open to the larger organisations that control; not only the narratives at meetings, but pretty much everything else” (Charity small, manager).

One VCO manager said that he felt that there was still the sense, amongst the majority of third sector organisations he knew, that it was sending out the wrong message from the outset that there was no trust between partners when “you asked to have something that might constitute a contractual agreement between partners in order to mitigate against risk”. One housing association manager expressed concern towards local organisations. He felt that there was an urgent need to be able to identify and manage different types of risk within their business and between organisations: “If some dig a little deeper some people will be surprised in terms of what they should insure for”. One respondent involved in the allocation of funding to TSOs, felt that there was a need for more specific support; especially for the more under-resourced organisations, in terms of staff and training:

“The ones who tend to run around throwing themselves at grants, funding, partnerships and saying we’ll do that without *fully* engaging with all aspects of assessing risk, need the most guidance” (VCO, manager).

What was a most revealing comment came from one participant who highlighted the notion of ‘risk-averse’ behavior:

“For those of us who understand ‘risk’ in terms of service contracts, measures of performance and frameworks of accountability, I think there are some significant issues, *especially* for small TSO/VCOs, that need addressing in terms of their understanding and ability to address the inevitable increase in requirements that divert risk away from public agencies and towards private contractors which now includes TSOs in its broadest sense” (Funding agency, funder).

Although it was identified as a significant theme from all interviews, how it was understood within a participant’s professional context, was noticeably different. The idea of ‘risk’ was identified as financial or reputational and in some instances was seen as a mechanism for reducing responsibility by allocating some of it to other organisations and minimising their exposure to ‘risk’. Several participants referred to this as ‘dumping’ and it was recognized by most participants as a practice that some partners were more proficient at than others. One respondent felt that for their small organisation:

“The risks are disproportionally weighted in terms of our finances, our reputation and our future but it still doesn’t stop some of our more domineering partners, from local VCOs, trying to dump more responsibility on us and in so doing excuse themselves. If that’s not a risk-averse practice, I don’t know what is. Where are *they* getting their training – Bloomberg money markets?” (VCO, manager)

The idea of reducing areas of organisational responsibility was equated, for some respondents, with reducing their exposure to risk. It was recognized that this could present a paradox to working collaboratively as it had the potential to precipitate an increase in risk for their partners. This could be in terms of financial loss and difficulty in securing funds or in terms of loss of reputation if something went wrong. TSOs, in general felt that, given

their smaller size; relative to their local authority, housing associations or local branch of a national company, the balance of risk weighed heavier on them than it did on many of their more 'resource-full' partners. However, the notion of 'risk' was viewed in different ways according to the nature of the enterprise. There was a marked polarity in responses from organisations with more understanding of the business aspects of running an enterprise; either for-profit or not-for profit. It was accepted that both types of enterprise needed to maintain their solvency, be sufficiently aware of their 'market-place' and to ascertain where they were most exposed.

Participant comments often highlighted a narrow understanding of the concept of risk. Although all interviewees referred to it in several contexts, it was not always clearly differentiated. This provided me with several opportunities to probe this area further. All respondents acknowledged that the limit of public liability their insurance companies advised them to have in place, had increased considerably in recent years. For organisations and individuals who offered services to their local authority, housing association and/or operated in collaborative partnership arrangements, applicants were required to have in place a minimum level of indemnity cover of five million pounds. This was viewed as a significant increase on the two million pounds of liability cover that had been "the standard requirement for smaller organisations to have in place for quite some time" (VCO, trainer). Compared to a local authority or housing association's insurance budget and liability cover, this was viewed as 'a small amount'. However, participants expressed concern that this increase in the limit of liability, and its associated premiums, did not relate to the level of risk they felt that their activities warranted. Notions of 'risky behavior' were not identified as frequently as that associated with damage to property or person.

What was clear from the findings was that all respondents covered a large area of professional activity. It was acknowledged that it increasingly extended outside their core areas of activity: the focus on learning and skills development. For some organisations, this was driven by ‘financial necessity’, ‘the identification of other areas of development’ or ‘responses to local partnership opportunities in the area’. The findings indicated that respondents expressed working in local partnerships as operating “on a ‘partnership scale’ that oscillates between ‘generally difficult’ to ‘textbook perfect’” (School, community link). It was clear from all respondents that the impact of the global financial crisis; which was agreed started early in 2008, had affected them all. They believed that as a direct result of this, they had to consider being more innovative and enterprising in their roles and to take more responsibility on at work. The impact that these changes had, on the nature of the work they did, was still manifesting itself. This was also believed to be impacting on their working relationships. One respondent summarised this sentiment:

“You can’t expect to throw people into a melting pot and not expect some to try to climb out when it gets a little hot. Some will try to help; others will look after themselves and let you drown. I am seeing more of that self-interest first and amongst VCOs. It’s not how most VCOs would like to see themselves but that is how we are being forced to change or is it just a survival instinct: eat or be eaten”
(VCO, Treasurer).

It is clear that participants identified contradictions related to their collaborative working arrangements. The economic and political ‘climate’ and the increased levels of individual and organisational financial insecurity precipitated by it, made some hesitant to query aspects of their partnership work. One participant, felt that it made her feel “more reluctant to challenge; unlike in the past. I choose my moments very carefully now” (SME, trainer).

One respondent also suggested a more cautionary approach to addressing points that were felt to be of importance but was aware of the response she may receive if they were vocalised:

“You *cannot* take the world and his dog on and some ‘issues’ are not really *that* important at the moment. You *have to* prioritise what it is that is worth losing your composure over or ruffling a few feathers at meetings and risk the exhaled, ‘Ahas, she’s off again’ response” (Tenant and Resident Association, volunteer).

6.3 Creating, sharing and squaring the knowledge circle

This section provides a synthesis of some of the key findings and suggestions that draw on how individuals feel that their knowledge of issues around trust, risk and resource-scarcity, shape their relationships. This section presents the findings relating to practice and the potential that participants felt that their insights into collaborative working, could contribute to the creation and transfer of knowledge between agencies, across sectors and into policy. Some participants were very forthcoming in what they felt needed to be done in order to affect changes to policy frames that directly impacted on them. The responses are understandably varied; given the diversity of organisations represented in this sample. The narratives suggest an interesting dichotomy that is not accounted for purely on the basis of type of organisation. It also examines ways in which insights may be used to inform future professional development in this area.

6.3.1 Reflections on multi-agency and cross-sector relationships

The findings presented in this section provide insights into the processes that participants went through in order to facilitate learning opportunities which were often described as being difficult to initiate and to sustain. They also indicated that this was an area in which individuals felt more could be done but some organisations felt “powerless to challenge, let alone change” (Charity, trainer). There were expressions of support towards different organisations coming together to share skills, resources and to collaborate on accessing funding. However, the caveat was that many felt that, whilst the aspirations were there, the differences in the nature of the underlying strength and direction of those motivations often “let the process down” (Housing Association, volunteer). Participants also felt that when they thought about what they did, they did not feel that they really had a grasp on what a good partnership process actually was but felt that they could clearly identify “the wrong way to do it” (Tenant and Resident Association, chair). Many felt that it varied from context to context and was depended on different elements “being in place, in the right quantity and of the right quality at the same time” (Housing Association, manager).

What also permeated the dialogues, was concern from smaller VCOs who were struggling to gain access to some partnerships; despite having a suitable skills set to offer and often a history of offering them. There were comments on the number of partnerships that were ‘unrepresentative’ and were made up of larger TSOs with very few smaller groups being given what one respondent described as “a sniff in let; alone a look in” (VCO, Treasurer). This was viewed as contributing towards feelings of mistrust between local groups with a ‘successful history of working together’. It was seen as making it more difficult for smaller VCO/TSOs to secure funding if they were not able to be represented in some of the larger, more ‘higher profile’ training opportunities. Three participants cited instances where they

had discovered that their organisations had been recorded on funding applications and their skills-sets as providers, but they had not been approached to be involved. One participant emailed me to tell me what had happened and gave me their permission to include the contents of their email in this thesis:

“One of my friends, in another voluntary group, said that she was looking forward to us working together again; to which I replied that it was news to me as nobody had approached us to ask us to deliver any part of the training programme. She showed me the application form, with our name clearly stated on it and a paragraph describing our contribution. Needless-to-say, we have been very guarded in our dealings with the other organisations who even when they knew that we knew, still did not offer us a training role or an apology. We chose not to query it with the funding agency because we knew that a) it would mean that that course would be pulled and the learners would suffer and b) that all agencies would suffer as it would put a ‘red mark’ on any application from the area in the future. I feel terrible as I feel complicit in a cover up” (VCO, manager).

I chose to include the entire explanation as it indicates an example of what some organisations are, apparently, prepared to engage in to secure funding. This type of activity was viewed as having the potential to precipitate a range of negative outcomes, such as in the reduction in current and future funding opportunities and in the irreparable damage it may cause to collaborative activities and some reputations.

Local partnership working was seen as an opportunity to share resources and to reduce the duplication of staffing, physical and financial resource allocation. This was viewed as a ‘good thing’ for local, resource-stretched groups but was also identified as providing an

opportunity for local and national government initiatives and policy to make it as a “default setting clause in the way they allocate funding and grant monies to local groups” (SME business, owner). It was also expressed as a commonly cited reason for not allocating funding due to “overlaps with other similar local funding applications” (SME, business, owner).

Whilst there were ‘overlapping’ areas of agreement that coalesced around the need to improve outcomes, the findings suggested that respondents were “‘wising-up’ to the significance of ‘outcomes’ versus ‘outputs’ and the increased focus on measurability” (VCO, administrator). There was general agreement amongst respondents that there was a need to improve how local partnerships functioned and delivered services. As a result of the recent economic downturn, there had been a significant increase in competition for different types of funding. This was also viewed as problematic as most respondents had experienced increases in the number of people contacting them for support. This had placed an increased burden on remaining local VCOs/TSOs and their local infrastructure support agencies. This was due to an increased need for local services but with less money and human resources to meet them. One participant quantified the experience for their organisation: “We have lost almost half of our volunteers since about 2009 and including some very well-trained ones” (VCO, volunteer).

It was known that some volunteers had either reduced their volunteering commitments or had stopped them altogether. When participants questioned their volunteers, they were informed that it was due to changes in their personal financial circumstances. This meant they were not able to afford to continue to volunteer. Some of the reasons cited included a reduction in the welfare benefits of some volunteers. Others had gained full-time employment or had moved out of the area for work. Taken together, these were viewed as

significant changes for many of this study's participants and a further impact on the changes already commented on.

One participant described volunteering as the “value-added for which they are no real figures to quantify how valuable it is until it has gone (VCO volunteer). As the majority of this study were also active volunteers within their communities, in addition to their roles noted here, they were well-placed to comment on their experiences from a different perspective. As one participant pointed out, “It also costs to be a volunteer. I am struggling financially myself at the moment so I have to look to cut my costs. Because I have to work more, it means that I have less time for the more altruistic pursuits I enjoy” (Social enterprise, trainer).

The changes in staffing for several organisations, included the loss of well-trained, experienced volunteer staff members. For some VCOs, this was compared to “falling off the cliff edge” (Infrastructure support, trainer). The respondents felt that from 2007/8 to 2010/11, the economic dynamics had been ‘exceptionally unsettling, both personally and professionally’. Some respondents, from both statutory and non-statutory organisations (i.e. a housing association and a medium-sized charity), questioned the capacity of some of the smaller VCOs to actually have any spare capacity to contribute more to their partnership-working. Many expressed their frustration at trying to get ““more out of less’ as being largely unsustainable in the short to mid-term and totally unsustainable beyond that” (Social enterprise, manager). One respondent summed up their experience as, “You cannot keep stretching an elastic band, can you?” (Charity local, manager).

All participants, despite the nature of their organisations, expressed a mixture of frustration and annoyance at the funding and accountability procedures they were required to complete:

“It isn’t that I am opposed to ‘form-filling’ as I’ve done it for years but the volume of paperwork, in addition to the emails and phone calls, is becoming ridiculous. We are a small VCO and more and more of my time is taken up with paperwork”
(VCO, administrator).

Another participant felt that: “As a large, well-resourced organisation, we can fairly easily absorb the extra measures required of us but I do fully appreciate the disproportionate burden it places on smaller organisations and especially on our voluntary and community partners” (Housing Association, manager). Procedures were identified that were required in order to safeguard their clients. These included carrying out due diligence across a range of measures, such as: maintaining service schedules and associated record keeping for fire equipment, alarms and conducting regular assessments for risks to people, property, resources and equipment. Increases in the accountability regimes to local authorities and, in particular funding and grant-awarding bodies, was identified as increasingly more time-consuming. This was felt, in part, to be due to their requirements for outcome-focused measures of attainment for participants of courses and training schemes they were funding. The issue of increased accountability and administrative paperwork, also extended to participants on training courses. They were often required to complete documentation that was required by the training provider to be submitted as part of the requirements for their funding submissions. This was identified, by several trainers of this study, as a “disincentive for some learners to join or to stay on a course; especially an issue for those with issues around literacy” (Social enterprise, trainer).

6.3.2 Collaboration: Opportunities for learning

Each interview participant was asked the question: ‘Are there opportunities for learning that present themselves to you from working in partnership?’ There was a general recognition that there were many opportunities for personal learning that could result from collaborative working arrangements and result in positive outcomes. Several areas were identified as having been precipitated directly from collaborative ventures. One participant (VCO, administrator) cited the development of a local cross-sector initiative that was located within a spare room in a community centre. It had been established as a social enterprise. Its primary role was to collate the spare capacity within the area for room hire, back office administrative support, volunteers, equipment and spare resources. It provided a location where office furniture could be donated and purchased from. This initiative had resulted from the difficulty in finding rooms to put courses on and spending hours phoning centres to locate somewhere to run a course or a workshop. This now meant that any local business, TSO or public body could telephone one number and locate a room for a meeting: from putting on a crèche to holding an event.

Another respondent cited that she had observed an increase in the diversity of local training providers with complementary skills. However, she felt that, whilst she had a new set of skills around finance and setting-up a social enterprise, she felt that having “more financially savvy, new and very focused organisations in the area; all hungry for contracts” had resulted in her feeling less likely to share ideas (VCO, trainer). In contrast, one VCO volunteer felt that the learning opportunities from collaboration had been more effective than the different finance workshops they had attended: “As I help out at the centre with

the finances I've been able to get my head around full cost recovery and how to charge other providers the going rate for the services we supply.”

These sometimes contradictory sentiments were not isolated as participants voiced their concerns over the impact of restrictive collaborative opportunities and engagement. Partnerships were identified, by some participants as “contributing towards building local capacity” (School, community liaison) and being “hugely beneficial as we had very limited understanding of the financial aspects” (Faith Organisation, manager). One thought that “working with a larger, local agency who is ‘on the ball’, and knows how we work, has been second to none” (Social enterprise, manager). However, some participants expressed their concerns that it set the ‘patterns of change’ in their local working relationships. Several articulated their concerns of the impact that these changes would have on learners and other users of their services within their areas. There was a strong sense, from several VCO/TSO participants, that they had to engage with the changes whilst at the same time being mindful and, in two cases, highly resentful.

The local school, college and local authority participants, welcomed an increase in the diversity of providers. They felt that their institutions “benefited from the learning and skills initiatives and the nationally recognized, certification of some of the third sector local initiatives” (College, community tutor). One was critical of what they termed, “less than collaboratively-wholesome ways of working” (Local Authority, community liaison). Another was critical of what they felt were “‘anti-partnership practices’ and ‘silo-mentality’” (School, Community Liaison Officer). They welcomed what they had observed as an increase in “more of a business-focus in the area and placing local learning needs above organizational” (College, community trainer). This appeared to be a faintly

‘veiled’ criticism that originated from several of their recent experiences of cross-sector collaborative work. There were many opportunities for developing learning and skills for young people and adult learners but the focus was also directed towards local agencies: “entrenched practices built up over years and secured with rivers of funding is a difficult one to change but *all* of us need to look outwards and inwards to our own learning” (Faith organisation, community liaison).

One national Housing Association manager felt that some TSOs needed a dose of “blue-sky thinking” and to move away from “territorial and narrow thinking.” This perception was characteristic of a core sentiment expressed, on a broad scale, from highly positive to highly negative and directed towards TSO/VCO organisations. Whilst conversations identified particular organisations for criticism or praise, the general tone of these comments was broader in nature and was less ‘collaborative’ and more ‘combative’ during several interviews.

The participants who were involved with community projects; with a specific emphasis on literacy, numeracy and language needs, focused their responses around the importance of developing provision collaboratively in the local area where their organisations operated. They cited the issues around diversity of learning needs, due to the demographics of their locations. As one VCO manager expressed:

“We have more than thirty languages spoken by people who attend our centre and English is not the main one. Within such a diverse community, there is a vast array of challenges and learning difficulties and/or disabilities. We *cannot* possibly address them on our own. We struggle as it is with all the different partnership arrangements we are part of but *without* them, we wouldn’t stand a chance”.

In particular, participants from community groups highlighted the need to make the range of learning services available to local people more accessible, as well as providing essential life skills. They were more often than not, the ‘frontline’ and acted as “conduits to other learning opportunities in the area” (Charity large, manager). This was identified by all organisations; irrespective of their nature or sector, to constitute an essential element to building capacity and contributing towards more local cohesion. All participants expressed concern that the practical dynamics of facilitating opportunities for learners appeared to be more difficult. They questioned the nature of the impact this was going to have on community cohesion: maintaining and developing cohesion within their multi-faith communities and building the capacities of the groups within it.

6.3.3 Developing practice

This section discusses the areas that were identified by participants as requiring further professional development. All participants felt that there were areas that were specific to their particular roles and responsibilities. However, few believed that their recent professional development had focused sufficiently on identifying and addressing some of the issues and challenges they had identified in local collaborative working arrangements. One participant expressed that she thought it strange that; given how central working together was, that there were not more opportunities to improve the skills required to “collaborate more effectively and enter into the true spirit of partnership” (Social enterprise, trainer).

Participants were asked how they felt their experiences could be used in order to help other practitioners and to contribute towards policy decision-making. Fifteen of the respondents

felt strongly that it was important to be able to manage expectations from their partners. One participant, from a small VCO, felt that the issue for her was in the term ‘managing’ and questioned who did the managing of expectations and what constituted an ‘expectation’. She further suggested that what needed to happen was: “all partners need to not only identify what it is that needs ‘managing’ and agree it but exactly what processes are to be used and agree those too” (VCO, manager).

Participants often felt that there was far too much use of “un-qualified loaded terms with assumptions that we are all singing from the same sheet” (Charity manager). Seventeen participants felt that it was essential that the expectations that policy-makers had for what collaborative activities between organisations could achieve, was informed by the experiences of a range of partnerships. It was felt that the support and training that was being offered to support collaborative working, needed to reflect the reality of the professional needs of organisations.

One participant, believed that measures to improve practice and to offer professional development opportunities to the diverse group of providers in her area, had at best been ‘patchy’ and at worst had been ‘ineffective’. The sense of frustration embedded in this individual’s emailed comments, captures the overall tone of much of the practical frustrations that were shared by third sector providers during the interviews:

“We need to make a big leap beyond selfish preoccupations, petty squabbling, *overwhelming* self-interest and preoccupation with our own survival and ignore others. We have a bl.....dy good opportunity here we are in danger of scr.....ing up. Policy makers have never really taken their head out of their a--ses, so how would they possibly know how bad it has become for third sector and smaller voluntary

orgs. They take their evidence sanitised and easy to digest and handed to them by those who are dependent on what they say to them for their own survival. Anything wrong with this picture? Wake up! Some of us are drowning here; anybody noticed? (VCO, manager).

This participant's 'plea' came at the end of a very animated and candid interview and at the end of a particularly difficult week for the organisation concerned. They wondered if they would be able to continue to open their doors to local people within their community. There were many anecdotes from participants around this time (2008-2011) of how financing had 'dried up', 'fallen off a cliff edge', 'required us to offer other things' or to 'contract our service provision'. The experiences of this study's participants are varied. There were considerable differences in the financial resources of small VCOs with annual incomes of less than fifty thousand pounds per year and housing associations in the millions of pounds per year.

"There is little real appreciation, or understanding, by government agencies of how much non-funded work goes into facilitating a partnership approach to delivering training opportunities collaboratively in this area. We cannot go for full cost recovery so we have to absorb what we can. We don't really witness our local authority partners sacrificing much extra to see that the work gets done. I think we are to be thankful that the projects receive funding at all" (VCO, funding officer).

Throughout these responses there are references to the fact that participants felt that the act of discussing their experiences enabled the opportunity to initiate, what one respondent expressed as, "the luxurious, self-indulgence of reflection - necessary but sometimes hard to justify when your face is pressed against the glass" (VCO, volunteer). This participant

shared several recent experiences of trying to get a programme going. They had the premises, funding and learners but they had experienced problems with their public sector partners being absent from crucial meetings. They suggested that integration and collaboration was becoming more of a problem with the majority of outcomes being driven by organisations that had “size and weight” but were not “pulling their weight...this needs addressing through training for all not just a few” (VCO, volunteer).

Several participants felt frustrated at what they knew needed to be addressed locally and what they struggled to change; despite numerous discussions to improve local relationships. Three VCO participants felt that in their ten years of working with local groups and national organisations in their own regions, they did not feel that enough attention had been given to investigating what had not been working well enough and why. One of their areas of concern was how the delivery of their learning and skills provision was being compromised. Although the findings indicate similar and contrasting perspectives of working in partnership, there was broad agreement of pivotal issues and challenges which were felt by all participants to either underpin or undermine their professional practice. The potential for these inconsistencies to compromise learning and skills provision, was highlighted as another area for concern and one that had been identified as being exacerbated by the very dramatic changes to public funding and other sources of income; including reductions in charitable donations.

The relentless extrinsic and intrinsic ‘motivations’ to ‘make things happen’; despite these highlighted concerns and difficulties, was identified as being a commitment to ‘making it work’ for learners and other service users. However, these findings also suggested that the constant pressure to ‘make it work’ was having an impact on individuals in terms of stress and general health. Of the twenty-five respondents, during the period of this study, more

than half indicated that they had had time off work which they directly attributed to the additional pressures they had experienced. Extra workloads and the financial uncertainty related to their jobs were the most frequently cited reasons. These were primarily from the third sector.

6.4 Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. It has provided further insights into the narratives of this study's participants. These findings demonstrate a number of significant deviations between the perspectives of this study's participants. One of these is the disparity in access to funding opportunities and the restrictive practices of engagement through commissioning and tendering processes. The reality is that the commissioners of some of the provision are larger third sector organisations. Some were reported to be allocating contracts on the basis of 'best cost focus' rather than 'best learner focus'. One of the findings suggests that elements; that can simultaneously be constructive and deconstructive, can come from similar types of organisations. The distinction between an 'us and them' in terms of cross-sector relations, is only partially true. One VCO manager summed this dichotomy up succinctly: "We highlight our distinctiveness when we feel ignored or marginalized within the 'bigger picture'. The rest of the time if things are going well, we don't focus on artificial sectoral divides."

The findings presented in this chapter, and in Chapter Five, suggest that partnership, as a way for organisations to work together, presents a number of dichotomies. The findings appear to frame a number of different 'discursive spaces' (Fairclough, 1992; Potter, 1996a). One of these is the expectation placed on partnership working and the individuals

who constitute them. This is manifested in a noticeable difference between the rhetoric of those organisations who are responsible for commissioning and those who are applicants. This highlighted a dichotomy in the relationship between partners and brought into question the very notion of partnership-working as an equitable practice. The next chapter will present a discussion of the elements that were highlighted from a closer analysis of the findings presented in Chapter Five and Chapter Six.

Chapter Seven

Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters presented a ‘kaleidoscope’ of perspectives from respondents who openly shared their experiences of working collaboratively. The narratives presented a vignette of the practical complexities of their situations. Together, the literature and this study’s findings demonstrate that the relationships between TSOs and state agencies are not neat, ‘boundaried’ or homogenous but are multi-layered, dynamic and influenced by horizontal and vertical policy environments (Alcock and Kendall, 2011). The intention of this chapter is to link these findings into what Polit and Hungler (1995:101) describe as: “a coherent structure that makes the body of accumulated knowledge more accessible and more useful, both to practitioners who seek to implement findings, and to researchers who seek to extend the knowledge base”.

This chapter will discuss the finding from this study’s respondents, in line with the theoretical framework presented in Chapter Two. It will discuss the key themes to have emerged from the interviews, using the conceptual and theoretical ‘lenses’ presented in Chapter Two. The answers to the main research question of this study will be presented, by first addressing the three subsidiary research questions which helped frame it. The critique, presented as part of the analysis and discussion of the findings, is not intended to be critical of any individual, or of their organisation, but of the policy context in which they operate.

7.2 What are the issues and challenges facing voluntary and community organisations who work in partnership?

According to Vangen and Huxham (2003), collaboration is paradoxical in nature. One of the key contradictions concerning partnership is the reason for its existence: to be able to integrate, manage and balance competing demands and interests in multifaceted social, institutional and economic environments (Luscher and Lewis, 2008). The different tensions and conflicts that can be manifested through this way of working can produce paradoxes such as cooperation versus competition (Das and Teng, 2000) and goal congruence versus goal diversity (Vangen and Huxham, 2011). Yet, as the findings presented in the previous two chapters have highlighted, balancing competing demands and interests can present additional layers of complexity, contradictions and tensions; contrasting with the original collaborative intentions of partnership (Luscher and Lewis, 2008).

The comments presented by this study's participants have suggested numerous difficulties and challenges to working in partnership which are not sufficiently reflected within the broad span of the literature. The themes, which emerged from the analysis of their interviews, around trust, risk, power, motivational objectives, nature and levels of communication and resource-sharing, highlight the practicalities of building and sustaining trust in inter-organisational relationships. They suggest that partnerships can be "obtuse and fragile" (National company, manager). Institutional theory suggests that for organisations to survive, they must adapt to the rules, norms and routines that are prevalent within the environment they operate (Scott, 1995). Participants highlighted the continuous nature of tensions between partners; some cited a reluctance to work with some agencies but the financial necessity to continue to do so.

7.2.1 Lack of clarity of roles

When individuals from different agencies, irrespective of whether they are labelled as ‘private’, ‘public’ or ‘third sector’, focus on the same issue, some are likely to think about it differently; some to be motivated by different goals and some to use different approaches. These ‘paradoxes of performing’ (Smith and Lewis, 2011) generate ambiguity about whether certain outcomes represent failure or success. The idea of trying to find a common ground on which to build appears to be one of the initial ‘stumbling blocks’ and one that receives insufficient attention in the literature. The notion of ‘common ground’ was viewed by participants as one of the most important preparatory stages of collaborative working. One respondent described it as: “This is where you establish what level of trust you have towards your intended partners and, ideally, you try to establish a base line and a set of ground rules to start from” (VCO, trainer).

Huxham and Vangen (2000) argue that structures that surround partnerships are often “complex and ambiguous; both in membership and status.” In practice, this appears to be true, as participants sometimes described their experiences as ‘unclear’ or ‘poorly defined’. Huxham and Vangen (2000) suggest that an explanation of why this prevails can be located in the literature around their ‘hierarchies of collaboration’. Structuration Theory presents a useful way of examining these structures using Riley’s (1983) system level of analysis; with a focus on the connectivity between action and activity (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). As this study’s respondents have demonstrated, a VCO can simultaneously be a member of a national, regional or local partnership; all with diverse structures. For this study’s respondents, this presented not only advantages to participation but also disadvantages: “the flow of momentum that comes from being involved in multiple dynamic partnership is often quite ‘heady’ and we have benefited from ‘putting ourselves

out there' (VCO manager). In contrast, for some being part of multiple collaborative activities produced the opposite effect: "I have never felt so demoralized in meeting after meeting when I feel that we are making up the numbers and have less and less influence. It is really hard to motivate yourself" (Charity small, trainer).

The literature suggests that for some agencies, the notion of 'collaborative inertia' is the binary conception to 'collaborative advantage' (Huxham, 2003:403). When individuals noted that they had an advantage, or saw an 'advantage', they also noted that sometimes what they saw was 'fleeting' as other partners 'moved in to claim that role'. Far from 'inert', participants having experienced that 'pipped at the post' experience accepted that they had sometimes worked against the partnership in order to 'de-rail it' or to show someone it in a 'bad light'. Others agreed that they did nothing and they gave very little to support the project over and above what was expected. These examples indicate a scale of activity and a serious challenge to building or maintaining social capital (Evans, 2000). This also provides an example of Strier's (2011) description of partnerships as being characterized by both conflict and collaboration. Morgan (1986) suggests that a clearer understanding of these paradoxes of partnership is preferable to pretending that they do not exist. Clearly they do, as this small study bears witness in the narratives of its participants.

Participants preferred to refer to 'underachieving local partnerships', in preference to 'failed partnerships'. Whilst this may represent an issue around linguistic semantics, it is more significant for its recognition of a "spectrum of failure to achieve" (Social enterprise, manager) according to one participant. One of the reasons believed to underpin this was the perception of imbalances in power between organisations; resulting in a lack of consensus between partners (Sullivan et al, 2002) and undermining any collaboration. This was thought to result from different levels of resource and authoritative/legislative capacity

and to be influenced by the types and numbers of groups that constituted local collaborations.

Bills and Glennerster (1998) suggest that economic theories not only indicate weakness in government and voluntary failure but also provide ways of understanding the motivations that lie behind constituted collaborative activity. The findings from this study demonstrate that the benefits that can be derived from sharing resources have enabled several organisations in this study to expand their provision and to gain advantages from collaborative activities. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) suggest that it creates influential links between organisations that can enable them to meet their objectives. For others, the experience of reducing opportunities was seen to direct them towards collaborative activities; sometimes as a result of the impetus to reduce their operating costs (Williamson, 1991). The findings from this study suggest that the economic necessity for collaborative partnerships will increase in the future. Fine and Green (2000) point towards the potential this may have for social capital. As the findings suggest, this presents another paradox: that of simultaneously adding to and subtracting from the quality and quantity of social interactions. Potapchuk et al (1997) describes it in the literature as the glue that holds a community together. The findings from this study have demonstrated that the 'glue' of social cohesion and social capital present varying levels of collaborative 'adhesion'. Luscher et al (2006) suggest that the idea of conflict and cooperation presents another contradiction in inter-agency collaborations.

Local authority (LA), housing association (HA) and national charitable bodies were viewed by all third sector participants as "more likely to 'take the lead' without very much discussion from other members" (VCO, trainer). One of the main reasons suggested was that they were often thought of as the main partners in collaborative activities because of

their relationship to different local funding regimes and initiatives. This was an interesting dichotomy given that respondents cited many projects in which LA, HA and national charity representatives were not actively involved in. Yet, they were 'positioned' by partnership members as if they were; sometimes when they were invited 'guests' at a meeting. This may suggest a deferential relationship between some organisations and a reference to a 'hierarchy of collaboration' (Huxham and Vangen's, 2000). It may also suggest the idea of 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital' (Gittel and Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000) and the idea of networks of 'strong and loose ties' (Onyx and Bullen, 2000) between organisations.

Sometimes the 'failure to take the lead' was related to not wishing to take the responsibility or feeling that it would take too much unfunded time to be able to take it on. Some public sector organisations with salaried staff, found that they generally took the lead position in meetings as "it is expected because my time is already paid for" (Local Authority, manager). Respondents expressed their annoyance that time and time again they stepped into the space in the absence of anyone speaking up and saying 'I'll take the chair' or 'we would like to be lead partner in this'. However, it was felt that the idea of a perception of a 'Goliath' over 'David' situation in partnerships was overplayed by some organisations. It was suggested (HA and LA, managers), that this promoted the idea of a 'sector divide' and an 'us and them' and served the interests of those who did not wish to take on a lead partner role. Some of the primary reasons that were suggested were the implications of it precipitating additional costs, responsibilities and risks for an organisation. This demonstrates what Smith and Lewis (2011) highlight as responses that embrace tensions simultaneously and suggest an underlying tension: two components of paradox.

7.2.2 ‘Short-termism’ and its impact on learning

One of the issues for participants was the perception of ‘short-termism’ and the notion of a ‘shelf-life’ for some learning and skills initiatives. This was due to changes in funding, grants and a move towards contracting and tendering; often in competition with other agencies. This was despite them recruiting well and supporting learners who had not been in employment, educational, training or anything else for that matter. It was believed to significantly reduce the potential of what could be achieved on two fronts. Firstly, the lack of development to establish learning and skills provision that could build human capital within the immediate area was viewed as “a terrible waste of opportunity” (Faith organisation, manager). Secondly, collaborative working practices struggled to establish themselves. Sometimes this was due to not having enough time which was felt to further reduce opportunity. This highlights the danger of different competing initiatives (Walker, 2007).

7.2.3 Trust as a necessity of collaboration

The theme of ‘trust’ was identified as a necessity in any collaborative initiative. There were tenuous links between what was viewed as constituting trusting behavior and increased risk-taking. The findings indicate a high level of tension, conflict, uncertainty and potential risk arising from inter-agency working within and between ‘sectors’. The literature suggests that, in collaborative activities, organisations are trying to reduce the potential for conflicts and disputes by increasing levels of co-operation and developing trust (Bateson, 1988; Das and Teng, 2001). Some of the findings from this study, whilst indicating that this is indeed the case for some, other participants noted that “far from

reducing the potential for conflict and increasing trust, it precipitated more”. Lewis (2000) describes this as an organizing paradox as it highlights the divergent and convergent organisational sub-cultures inherent in partnerships.

Respondents engaged in multi-agency projects to jointly deliver learning and skills training. Some arrangements were constituted through Local Strategic Partnerships or Neighbourhood Councils. Many partnerships had differing levels of power and influence and this precipitated both benefits and problems for partners. The findings and the literature suggest that working collaboratively is not clearly differentiated and is a far more contentious experience for many individuals; regardless of the nature of the organisations they represent or the resources they are able to access. The findings question the basis on which high levels of expectation are levied towards working in partnership. This is underpinned by a lack of understanding of the inequities in the distribution of risk, access to resources and the challenges to trust between organisations. Hardy et al (1998) points out that in trust-based relationships, risk is shared, while in masquerades risk is disproportionately carried by the subordinate or dependent participant. This study’s findings suggest that some of these partnership experiences may represent more ‘masquerade’ than ‘trust-based’ relationships.

7.2.4 Risk takers and risk averters

The issue of trust and levels of dependence between partners, and how it relates to levels of risk, are clearly complex areas to navigate (Anderson, 1996). Risk was identified as a factor in collaborations. All respondents had experienced the widespread growth of service contract arrangements and the associated regulatory controls and risk management procedures that they precipitated. The literature suggests that this way of working has

produced asymmetric power relationships, played out through the management of performance outcomes and the transfer of risks (Clark and Glendinning, 2002; Glendinning et al, 2002). This study's respondents have indicated how working in partnership clearly precipitates risks for their organisations which are increased by extending the diversity of these working arrangements across organisational boundaries (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). The literature indicates that this represents a problem as collaborative activities are viewed as particularly at risk (Butler, 1995; Gill et al, 2005). Extending these working arrangements across boundaries also "brings complexity and ambiguity that can generate confusion and weaken accountability" (Audit Commission, 2005). They further suggest that local public bodies should be much more constructively critical about this form of working and suggest that it may not be the best solution in every case.

Throughout the literature there are signposts to the inequalities in available resources for members of partnerships which are viewed as constituting challenges for the development of successful cross-sector voluntary and community sector partnerships (Shaw, 2008; Glasby et al, 2011). This is a position borne out by this study's findings. It has argued that the rapid increase in the number of partnerships has left some organisations questioning their ability to retain their independence, their organisation's original vision and their capacity to respond to what David Cameron, the current Prime Minister, sees as 'opportunities' for voluntary and community organisations (Cabinet Office, 2010c). These 'opportunities' could be ways of making cost-savings by avoiding duplication of similar types of local training and offering learning and skills development that benefits from providers with different skills sets (Harker et al, 2004). It might also offer a way for VCOs to build their human and physical resource capacities as a result of working with better resources and perhaps more experienced organisations. This was indicated by three of this study's respondents, as raising their confidence to be able apply for funding or to

contribute towards projects that were viewed as being more demanding than they had previously felt confident to take part in. Putnam (1999) suggested that this form of human capital investment can be powerful and influential. Bourdieu (1986) argued for the individual and groups to reproduce more social capital through their relationships.

At its most fundamental, trust is the ultimate partnership as it is concerned with shared meaning through communicative practices involving all participants (Fukayama, 1995). This is provided they are prepared to establish a common ground irrespective of their differences (Hardy et al, 1998). The literature on trust highlights issues around collaborative advantage and disadvantage. It is clear that, for some agencies, there are advantages to working collaboratively. For others, the 'downside' was felt to be weighing against the advantages. However, opting out of collaborative opportunities, or not opting into them, was not viewed as 'financially feasible' for nearly all respondents. This was due to the strong emphasis placed on collaborative forms of skills delivery, which is embodied by many funding mechanisms as a central criterion on which awards are often granted.

This section has highlighted what respondents felt constituted challenges and issues relating to their collaborative practices with other organisations and how these were understood to affect working practices, organizational objectives and the nature of provision for the learners they supported. Whilst some of the responses varied considerably, a key finding was the lack of identification of the dichotomies that were operating within their professional contexts. For others, these dichotomies were felt to precipitate very significant challenges for them, their agencies and their learners. The next section addresses some of these.

7.3 How are the practices of individuals who work in voluntary and community organisations affected by the issues and challenges they identify?

Practitioners can be enthusiastic and invest enormous amount of time, energy and resources into providing learning and skills. These findings indicate that their responses presented a less than ideal impression of their current collaborative practices. It suggested an increased awareness amongst VCOs, and their partners, of the recent and current debates on their position in the service delivery argument. They had all experienced a sustained growth in the number of collaborative relationships between public sector agencies and national businesses and voluntary and community agencies. This study's respondents made numerous references to the increased requirements to work more collaboratively as something that was expected or required of them by contractual or funding arrangements. The literature underpins this sentiment clearly as a way of working which is either recommended as good practice or enshrined within legislation as a necessity (Miller and Ahmad, 2000). The literature suggested what respondents identified from their practice: a focus on what was seen to work; irrespective of which type of organization was delivering it (Kramer, 1999).

Another finding was the polarization of views from within VCOs which was levied towards other VCOs. This was presented as a criticism of what they perceived as 'financial inertia' on the part of some of the local groups they partnered with. However, what was significant was the concern expressed by both VCO and non-VCOs about the impact, and the increased difficulties, in delivering a more differentiated and stepped provision into learning for those learners for whom a level two course was not appropriate. This raised a

number of concerns from all respondents but these concerns were expressed most forcibly by the smaller VCOs who had the most direct and recent experience of delivering entry (below Level 2) learning and skills provision. There was a very clear indication in the data that highlighted changes to practices that were clearly linked to the issues and challenges identified in this study's introductory chapter. VCOs felt that financial uncertainty was the most significant influencer as to which projects they became involved in and which agencies they partnered with. The "ever present cloud of financial uncertainty" (VCO, funding officer), was attributed with the idea that autonomy was "an embraceable ideal, locked in a world of make-believe" (VCO, funding officer).

In the interviews, the majority of respondents who worked with VCOs felt that they needed to offer more administrative support than they had previously. This was viewed as a direct result of increased accountability requirements due to tighter funding criteria. Many VCOs simply could not afford to access specialist services and training. This highlighted differences in perspectives and polarized some respondents. It was felt that everyone's practice had had to change in some way as a result of reductions in funding. In turn, this was seen as continuing to have an impact of the experiences of learners and the diversity of local provision that they could access. Sometimes, the result was that some learners could only access learning and skills development opportunities from the better-financed mainstream providers such as the local college. This represented an important departure from previous models of delivery that had placed much of the same type of provision within community-based provision and was cited by learners as their preferred location for training. Coffield (2000) questions the future of different forms of learning opportunity if the focus remains on a polarization of provision towards more formal provision.

7.4 How can knowledge of issues and challenges of working in partnership contribute towards improving practice and informing policy?

The literature has suggested that the conception of collaborative partnership-working is constituted of paradoxes (Maor, 1999). I suggest that some of these contradictions can be located in the idea of 'overlapping fields' and 'fault and fracture lines'. These find expression in the 'textual' and social practices of individuals, organizations and societal levels at micro, meso and macro levels respectively (Fairclough, 1992). This study's participants have contributed towards an examination of these 'fields'. Burgess (1984:102) suggests that interviews can be interpreted as "a 'conversation with a purpose' which is grounded in specific contents, events and examples in order to illuminate the complexity of the phenomena being investigated".

Interestingly, there was little recognition in the responses from participants that indicated anything other than a 'light sprinkling' of awareness of the contradictions inherent in much of their professional interactions. Whilst the literature (Das and Teng, 2000; Vangen and Huxham, 2011) refers to the contradictions of working collaboratively. Working in partnership was considered to be a way of 'getting things done' and was actively encouraged and promoted at a local, regional and national level by local authorities, infrastructure agencies and the majority of sources of funding that were available. The direct impact on the working practices of individuals, and their organisations, and how this shaped what they did, appears to be largely ignored in the bulk of the writing on partnership.

What constitutes learning and skills development has been shown in the literature, and through the narratives of this study's respondents, to be diverse. It is the flexibility and responsiveness of individual and localised collaborative working arrangements that has enabled so many successful examples of partnership-working to have emerged. In attempting to explore partnership, this study has illustrated that there are tangible reasons why the sometimes fragile dynamics of organisational relationships, and the policy landscape that contribute towards shaping them, may have implications for TSO/VCOs. The implications of this may extend to government intentions to build the skills, training and a broader educational base through the collaborative practices involving government agencies, private organisations and TSOs.

The literature suggests that working in partnership is viewed as a complex, challenging and policy-infused concept that operates across a range of contexts and serves a multitude of agendas (OTS, 2006; Martin et al, 2001). Evidence from practitioners is under-represented in the literature and policy decision-making itself was not underpinned by rigorous, well-thought through, and sufficiently evidenced-based decision-making processes (Bullock et al, 2001; Coffield, 2008). The findings from this study suggest that experiences from organisations are not universally sought from service providers in an area. Often, 'snapshot consultations' as they came to be known in one location, were solicited from an unrepresentative sample of providers. The next chapter will present a synthesis of this point.

7.5 How does the experience of delivering learning and skills development in partnership with other organisations affect voluntary and community organisations?

The findings presented in this study, and the review of the literature, have illuminated several areas that are known to affect VCOs and their partners. These are separated into three broad groupings: changes to practice, changes to behavior and changes to organisational structure. Each of these is addressed in section 7.5.

7.5.1 Locked in or locked out: the migration into networks

One respondent referred to their move away from public-TSO partnerships as a ‘flight from hierarchy’. “We kidded ourselves all through the 90’s when the money-train of new Labour flowed past our door; who were we to ignore it. We put the notions of ‘not-for-real partnership’ to one side. It always was, and is even more so, the case of a hierarchical tiering” (Social enterprise, manager).

The focus of many discussions often gravitated towards what respondents perceived as the more negative aspects of their collaborative experiences. Given the difficult and uncertain economic environment that prevailed at the time of this study’s interviews, this was hardly surprising. What was emerging was a move, on behalf of some agencies, to either establish or to join existing and rapidly expanding networks of third sector and private training providers. Several participants were already actively involved in different local and regional networks. Rhodes (1997) characterizes an expansion of “self-organising, inter-

organisational networks” by their relative autonomy, interdependence and their rules. Perhaps, this is what Etzioni referred to as the “organisations of the future” (1973).

7.5.2 The trust ‘game’: to trust or not to trust, *that is the real question*

The theoretical literature that focusses attention around the concept of trust and its importance in inter-organisational working, is numerous and diverse in nature. What is of surprise, is how little of it reflects the realities of the diverse practices of localized, inter-organisational collaborative practice. Many of these relationships were shown to present challenges to building and maintaining trusting relationships and addressing the outcomes that can result from the loss of trust. The importance of trust in underpinning local, national and European initiatives highlights the importance of understanding what constitutes a trusting collaborative relationship. McMurray (2007) describes these operating environments as increasingly bureaucratic and contractually-focused with the potential to impair effective partnership-working. This mirrors the overwhelming findings from this study’s participants; irrespective of the nature of the organisations they belong to.

Trust builds over multiple interactions and through navigating multiple projects. Economic constraints and challenges may mean that some cannot plan too far ahead. A recurring issue for participants has been their experiences and perceptions of the increasingly confrontational nature of partnership work. For some, the experience of collaborating has become the antithesis of the term itself. The literature positions partnering and collaboration as approaches to avoid conflicts and disputes by increasing levels of co-operation and developing organisational relationships build on trust (Audit Commission, 1998; Shaw, 2004). However, as has been demonstrated from the experiences of this

study's participants, collaborating with other agencies does not guarantee trust or that tensions will not arise (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b:230). It also demonstrates the complexity of trust; described by one of this study's participants as "a spectrum disorder as it moves across a sliding scale of intensity" (Social enterprise, trainer). Trust does not come in 'one size' and the degree of trust between partners has been seen to be a critical factor in, not only maintaining but in shaping relationships between all partners. According to Walker (2007), as a consequence, it will also shape the outcomes from any partnership activity.

The previous answers have highlighted the responses from individuals to develop their capacity to participate in different organisational structures; some temporary, others more permanent. The interviews provided rich data on the experiences of voluntary and community organisations, and the perceptions of organisations who work with VCOs. All participants recognized that relationships were undergoing significant changes and many third sector agencies questioned the future of their organisations in their present forms. Whilst the perceptions of this study's participants indicated a number of tensions associated with working in partnership, it also highlighted that, for some agencies, they had experienced a 'revival in fortunes' and one that they welcomed.

Several VCOs recognized that they were changing aspects of their own working practices in order to be able to continue to deliver learning opportunities. For some, this had resulted in them not being able to continue to offer skills support to their learners at all. Instead, they had sub-contracted this aspect of their service to other providers such as local private training providers or national agencies, such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA). Some VCOs allowed local further education colleges to use their rooms within community facilities, as extensions to their local school or colleges' own learning

opportunities. Others allowed their premises to be utilized by other training providers for a fee. Increasingly, the courses that the school, college or training providers offered were similar to what had been delivered by their host organisation when they had been in receipt of funding to deliver them. These changes facilitated a network of low-cost, ‘satellite learning venues’ for the mainstream providers and affordable, well-positioned venues. Several VCO respondents had questioned their ability to attract funding for numeracy and literacy courses and had cited ‘local and external competition’ with local colleges and other providers as part of the explanation for this.

7.5.3 Collaboration: an increasingly risky-business

The literature is inadequate in its discussion and quantitative assessment of the real and present risks inherent in inter-organisational working involving third sector agencies. I have to question why this is the case? Private and public organisations are knowledgeable and professionally informed regarding public and professional indemnity. They quantify their own areas of exposure to risk and seek to limit their liability as an organisation. As one housing association manager explained:

“We require all our providers to have at least five million pounds worth of cover. We will also now ask about any claims before considering them to go on our register of training providers.”

On a personal level most of us identify with the idea of risk: stepping too close to the edge of a cliff; driving too quickly on a wet road. Yet, the notions of more abstract, less

visually-obvious risks, such as whether or not to enter into a relationship, are often separated from the notion of risk. Why? Is it because emotion, rather than reason is in the ascent? The issue of risk and its role in collaborative activities has been re-positioned in the minds of several of this study's participants. This had been, as one respondent expressed: "a growing concern but one we had failed to really think about until a recent incident with a private organisation" (Social enterprise, manager). The situation referred to, resulted in the private company suing the third sector agency. Whilst they were covered under the terms of their professional indemnity and public liability insurances and incurred no financial losses, it did create "a cloud for a time over our reputation as a provider until the situation was resolved" (Social enterprise, manager). For this organisation, it highlighted the litigious dynamics that are permeating into an increasingly corporatized environment that is described in the literature around partnership-working (Shield and Evans, 1998; Atkinson et al, 2007). What is significant here, are the changes that individual organisations have to consider in order to indemnify themselves further against their future interactions (Das and Teng, 2001). As one respondent expressed, "it is now far more than someone tripping over on our premises" (VCO charity, manager). There were differences and some clear distinctions, between TSOs and larger organisations in their understanding of risk and its implications.

7.5.4 Collaborative advantage or collaborative disadvantage

The review of the literature highlighted a number of facets to partnership working that indicated contradictions in the requirements for community-based, not-for-profit agencies to seek out collaborative partnerships. The experiences of this study's participants have been varied. Some respondents had been working successfully in what Onyx and Bullen

(2000) describe as 'strong and loose-tie' collaborative partnerships; consisting of multi-agency and cross-sector hybrid groupings of local authorities, businesses and not-for-profit organisations. There was evidence, from the findings, that suggested that larger organisations; with diverse and well-established funding streams, are at a significant advantage with respect to collaborating. They were more likely to be in positions to commission other training providers - private, public or third sector - to deliver parts or all of a programme, whilst retaining overall control of the project. For those providers, who had witnessed a reduction in their ability to access funding to put on courses they had previously fronted, this presented a significant disadvantage. They could now be one of many providers in their area. Individual providers were becoming less likely to deliver a course without another agency being involved at some point due to restrictions in the funding criteria. Despite a track record of success with groups of learners with a wide range of learning needs, several VCO/TSO organisations found themselves competing for contracts with other providers; sometimes from outside their area, for a reducing number of funded initiatives.

The impact on the quality and nature of learning and skills provision, in what are often socially, culturally and economically challenging contexts, presents a less-than-favourable picture of the outcomes of partnership-working. The literature suggests that 'collaborative advantage' and 'collaborative inertia' are a binary relationship (Huxham, 2003). I suggest that, from the experiences of this study's sample, there was nothing 'inert' about the responses of participants who felt that they were in disadvantageous positions with respect to other agencies. Their responses took several forms. Some respondents openly admitted to 'sabotaging' activities by doing 'the minimum' or by delaying paperwork or by saying that they would no longer be able to attend a meeting or withdrawing from the partnership

and citing problems with the partnership. Others admitted to “taking the idea and seeking funding elsewhere for it; effectively creating competition” (Social enterprise, manager).

Respondents expressed awareness of an increase in the requirements from commissioning agents, such as local authorities, funding agents and the voluntary and community sector, to deliver project and training initiatives in partnership. There was a particular focus on organisations whose remit was on improving employability, mental and physical well-being. It also included delivering some of their local authority’s contractual obligations, such as the maintenance of local green spaces. Organisations who were involved in this increase in local group commissioning, were not always locally-based groups with a history of working together. Some represented recently formed groups who were provided with three year funding to deliver a particular project in partnership with the local authority and local groups. Sometimes, the first time local VCO groups knew of funded partnership initiatives of this nature, was when local authority representatives informed them at strategic partnership meetings.

The basis on which decisions of this nature were taken, was challenged by some local organisations. This was seen as impacting on their ability to access funding provision on an equal basis and excluding them from the opportunity to take part in local partnership opportunities. Part of the issue of this ‘exclusion’ was thought to be due to several factors. Many local groups did not have local authority ‘approved contractor status’. They often had insufficient levels of indemnity cover or were not able to demonstrate a particular legal framework, such as being constituted as a social enterprise or a registered charity. Respondents were aware that their legal status could be an issue in being considered for different types of funding even if it was not stipulated. Several groups in this study were undergoing the process of becoming registered charities or social enterprises for this reason

and viewed it as a means of, not only enhancing their status, but of increasing the sources of funding they were able to apply for. Others felt that they were marginalized in preference to those with the “required or preferred contractor status” (VCO, administrator). This was despite a history of successful local collaborations. This sometimes reduced their role on a project to a lesser one; despite the fact that the funding application would have been meaningless without them. Exploring this through the ‘lens’ of New Public Management ideology, these challenges demonstrate a shift towards greater competition and the use of management practices (McLaughlin et al, 2002; Hood and Jackson, 1991).

The literature indicates significant variations in the definition, scope and structure of partnerships. It demonstrates a dominant narrative from Government agencies in the promotion of collaborative working arrangements. Even when the literature is inclusive of empirical, qualitative data involving third sector organisations, it is all too often under-representative of the experiences of smaller VCOs. There is an absence of literature that focusses on organisations whose collaborative role is not always as a named partner, but takes the role of an outsourced, sub-contractor of a partnership initiative. This role is to help one of the named partners to deliver on their contractual requirements. The evidence suggested from this study’s data, revealed that respondents whose opinions were sought by third sector research bodies felt uneasy about expressing their opinions concerning the practicalities of collaborative working arrangements. This was felt to reflect their concerns over whether what they expressed impacted on their organisation’s future role in local initiatives and their ability to access sources of funding. These were very real areas of concern. This presents challenges in terms of conflicting agendas, different expectations and difficulties in communication.

The economic constraints, precipitated by the global economic crisis of 2007/8, were identified as a key factor that increased pressure on organisations to work more in partnership. This was often as a result of the need to generate income such as by renting space in underused buildings to local learning providers to put on courses. Other respondents provided examples of exchanging specialist services with other organisations such as the partial population of funding applications in exchange for the design of promotional material or the sharing of staff with specific expertise such as web design. Individual measures of this nature do not always contribute significant cost savings for organisations. However, all respondents felt that it not only saved time and money, but that it represented a more efficient way of working together and contributed towards building local capacity. Three VCOs had gained extra income streams from implementing such practices. One had completely replaced a core funding stream over the duration of this study. They had rented out rooms to local learning and skills providers, such as private training companies and local colleges. They admitted that getting them to pay was another issue but they were becoming far tougher at chasing outstanding invoices now that they had committed a volunteer to focus on the task. One organisation had developed a fee-paying consultancy role; whilst another provided specialist computer and design-skills training. Foley and Edwards (1999) suggest that this wide range of economic and non-economic resourcing are essential as a means of building social capital and shaping collaborative activities.

There were several personal anecdotes of underperforming collaborative ventures. The overall analysis of the data revealed a fairly robust view of partnership-working. It also indicated measure of acceptance of the issues and challenges that the majority of participants identified as being common themes in their day-to-day practice. Others felt that their activities were compromised, or in some cases curtailed, due to the “unrealistic

financial and high levels of risk expected of us” (VCO, treasurer). There were perceptions of inequalities from all respondents; even if they personally did not feel that they were disadvantaged. There was a general recognition of the challenges that were often experienced by smaller VCOs and other groups from the third sector. Participants admitted that they spoke too much or too little at meetings and were not always sensitive to the needs of others. Housing associations, larger charities and local authority representatives, felt that they needed to be aware of the impact they could have at meetings as they were generally viewed as a dominant player. There was a strong sense, from the findings, that there were imbalances that existed that needed addressing if working in this way was to precipitate better results. On a practical level, this was viewed as neither a quick nor a pain free process.

These findings also vocalized some mistrust towards infrastructure support agencies. The literature points to their role as a conduit in “helping to shape government policy” (Cabinet Office, 2010c). Several respondents expressed that they represented the needs of government and themselves, rather than those of VCOs/TSOs. There was support for local agencies. Individuals who worked for them were often singled out for praise. However, there was a feeling that they too represented largely self-interest groups who were also chasing funding to continue.

There were many criticisms from participants regarding an increase in what they saw as the imposition of partnership-working and the changes that were taking place locally. Many of these were viewed as compromising the ‘goodwill’ trust that had been built up between organisations over previous years. As Sako (1998) points out, this takes the form of shared and overlapping values and goals. Some participants had witnessed a sudden reduction in known staff members, whose remit was to work with their local community groups and

who worked for housing associations and LEAs. This had precipitated a number of instances of interruptions to established lines of communication. Smaller organisations were viewed as being more exposed to these changes in terms of the impact of outside agency competitive tendering and their ability to attract funding.

7.6 Summary

This chapter has presented the answer to the main research question by first synthesizing answers presented to the three subsidiary questions. They established that issues, such as challenges to trust, had precipitated a simultaneously risk-averse and risk-burdened dichotomy for some organisations. The existing literature and the findings from this study, have suggested many elements that affect voluntary and community organisations; their collaborative working arrangements and their capacity to deliver and develop learning and skills initiatives. The next, and final chapter of this study, suggests that the underpinning of organisational relationships is so fundamental to the implementation of such a diverse array of learning and skills initiatives, that it requires a re-orientation to a more critical analysis of partnership.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has presented ‘partnership’ as a conceptually-complex, often contradictory, set of competing narratives. The analysis of this study’s findings and the literature identified ‘fractures, fissures and fault lines’. These represented areas that suggested that the roles of those who work in partnerships have become increasingly tenuous. It has implied that this has the potential to limit the effectiveness and reach of collaborative relationships.

The analysis and subsequent discussions of the themes identified from this study’s respondents presented in the previous chapters, provided answers to the research questions. This chapter presents a highly reflective account and aims to draw together its main conclusions and contributions. It considers, through different ‘metaphorical lenses’ the practical implications of the findings which are relevant to my own professional practice. By so doing, it suggests how they may contribute towards theoretical and practical considerations for other practitioners. Chapter Eight presents a synthesis of the arguments presented throughout this thesis; it considers their implications, makes suggestions for further areas of research and presents the theoretical model which has been precipitated from this study.

This research set out to review partnership in the field of learning and skills development. It had a specific focus on the inter-organisational behaviour that facilitates its delivery. I originally set out to investigate and to gain an understanding of why some VCOs appeared to be feeling increasingly ‘voiceless’ by their experiences of working in partnership. Why

was it perceived as more an area of dissension for some than one of collaboration; whilst others felt empowered by this way of working? I wanted to establish why ‘partner-ship’ was becoming more of a ‘battle-ship’ experience; with the resulting damage being impoverished relations between individuals and a reduction in differentiated learning and skills initiatives for learners (Watters, 2005). I set myself a task for which I had no ‘road map’: to explore the breadth and depth of the ‘terrain’ of partnership which resulted in what Baskar (2002b) describes as a larger conceptual map of reality.

In this chapter, I suggest that learning and skills provision needs to retain, and in fact broaden, its approaches to delivering diverse and more inclusive opportunities for learners. In its broadest interpretation and application, this study’s respondents believe that learning and skills provision needs to be able to offer initiatives that are suitably differentiated for learners to access; appropriately differentiated for them to be able to engage with and have clearly ‘signposted pathways’ to other forms of learning (Watters, 2005).

This chapter argues for a broader and more nuanced view of the concept and mobilization of ‘partnership’. It suggests that it is part of a far more dense, convoluted and theoretically-rich area of research. It presents a model of a conceptualization of partnership and partnership-working, that has resulted from this study’s need to find a metaphorical ‘compass-bearing’ through which to orientate this research and to answer my initial enquiry and the resulting research questions. However, in doing this it feels that more questions, with different formulations, have been precipitated for further forms of enquiry. In reaching Chapter Eight of this thesis, I feel that only a ‘scratch’ on the surface of this investigation has been made.

A number of assertions have been made in this study, informed by the literature and the empirical findings from this study's respondents. They have suggested a vocabulary of high expectation (Walmsley, 2006), ambiguous conceptual devices (Glendinning, 2002a) woven into corporate and business-orientated perspectives which influenced the policy and practice environments (Goddard, 2006). This study has sought the perceptions of individuals whose professional roles require them to work with organisations in order to facilitate the development of learning and skills. The intention was to explore how these experiences compared with the rhetoric and expectations levied on third sector organisations and to establish what affect they had on them. The findings from this study contribute towards the implications for learning and skills development, community-located provision and policy legislation with a focus on third sector delivery. However, in considering any implications, this study is not without its limitations and these will be considered in the next section.

8.2 Limitations of this research study

There are several limitations pertaining to this study. One of them has been its small-scale and mixed sample of respondents. Further studies would need to involve a larger, less differentiated sample or a larger more differentiated sample frame of voluntary and community organisations, public and private organisations. This could contribute towards building a comprehensive database of cross-sector partnership activity. I would have liked to have recruited more participants from VCOs into the sample in order to strengthen their representation within this study. In turn, this might have produced different or more concurrent responses, which would have further contributed towards the rigour of this study.

The commencement of this research coincided with the beginning of the global financial crisis of 2007/8. During that time, many of this study's third sector organisations and public agencies were experiencing financial challenges. Given the factors present at the time of recruitment, recruiting a reasonably representative sample of participants, who were currently active in partnership working, was an achievement. Whilst the VCO sample size was small, the study's twenty-five interview participants did provide corroborative responses and also highlighted a number of dichotomies which had been indicated in the literature.

Another potentially limiting factor was the fragmented timescale that occurred at strategic points in the research cycle, which limited access to interview participants. This was partly due to individuals being based in different geographical areas. I believe this strengthened the study as participants were spread out over a larger area and did not work together. It also presented an additional logistics issue for me and one that I had not fully appreciated at the time when I had broadened the sample frame. The objective had been to reduce bias and strengthen the anonymity and confidentiality of my sample. Sometimes, the fragmented timescale for conducting the interviews was due to the difficulties associated with synthesising work timetables for participant and researcher. What might have been convenient for me was not necessarily convenient for my participants and the other way around. On several occasions, interviews were interrupted due to factors that required participants to attend to work-related problems. Some of these were urgent in nature. Some were not. Where this was likely to present a problem for conducting an interview, it was agreed that we would conduct the interview elsewhere.

There were several issues associated with the practicalities of conducting a research study whilst working full-time and interviewing people with full-time working commitments.

Issues such as researcher and participant fatigue were discussed and if it was felt that what was being discussed was perhaps compromised by fatigue, then by mutual agreement the conversation was terminated. A note was made by me to re-visit the same questions at the next meeting. Sometimes, neither the interviewer nor the participant were as fresh and focused during an interview as perhaps we would have liked. This was addressed within the interview in a number of ways. By mutual agreement, interviews or part of interviews, were continued outside 'office hours' by telephone, Skype, instant messaging or email. The questions were emailed to the participant to reflect over and they emailed me their responses. This was a suitable practical compromise in the event that a follow-up interview was neither possible nor practical within a short period of time after the cancelled or prematurely terminated interview. This 'planned for' flexible approach enabled the conversational flow, between the researcher and participant, to continue in situations where it may have not have been possible due to the limitations previously outlined.

8.3 Reflections on the study

This section will consider the implications from this research study for my professional practice. In addition, it will consider how it may contribute towards informing policy, learning and skills provision and the individuals and their organisations who experience and deliver training.

8.3.1 Implications for policy

Since the completion of this study in 2011, there have been significant changes in the local, regional and national landscape, both economically and politically. The drive for different

types of organisations to work together in partnership has gathered momentum, as represented in the literature and in the experiences of this study's participants. These changes can be explained, in part, by the economic contraction in public finance. These have resulted in an ever greater need to make financial savings, but also in the policy frameworks which contribute to the framing of these initiatives. This further emphasises the need for policy-making to be effective in its support and realistic in its expectations (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Unfortunately, the contraction in public funding may also have made it even more difficult for individuals, and less well-resourced third sector organisations, to gain funding to research their own practice. It may also have made it more difficult to deliver more 'outcome' rather than 'output' measured opportunities with some of the euphemistically termed 'hard-to-engage' learners (Grief et al, 2002).

The national political and economic dynamics which have taken place during the period of this study 2008 - 2011, have impacted on the role of partnership working for many organisations operating across all three 'sector' arenas of public activity. The extent to which this has taken place will be the remit of other research studies to measure. What is clear, from the experiences of this study's respondents, is that the 'cocktail' of global economic recessionary pressures, welfare reform initiatives and the change of government in the United Kingdom in May 2010, continues to exert, and to exacerbate, what was already perceived as 'a challenging environment to operate in' by many of this study's participants.

It is important that appropriate resources are made available to community organisations, to be able to contribute towards the empirical knowledge-base relating to TSOs and their activities. In so doing, this would further contribute towards capacity-building for those individuals, their organisations and local community networks. It is only in recognising

and supporting a wide-spectrum of partnership stakeholders, that a more detailed picture of the dynamics of how they deliver, or under-deliver, can be understood and be appropriately supported (Taylor et al, 2003). This underpins a truly equitable base on which to build policy and allocate resources in the future (Yanow, 1996).

A survey of policy-making in 2001 found that a limited range of evidence appeared to be used by government departments in the evaluation of domestic and international research and statistics (Bullock et al, 2001). According to the Cabinet Office (1999), ultimately policy-making is about delivering outcomes which result in desired change in the real world and are informed by a representative evidence base. The gaps in the literature suggest a need for more 'sustained interactivity' (Huberman, 1987) between researchers and practitioners and practitioner-researchers. There is also a need for and an awareness that "egalitarianism in sources of evidence" is not equally represented across all sectors (Nutley et al, 2002:3). Given the importance of policy-making to "the strength of the government as a whole, and that of the country at large", the necessity for policy-making to "confront reality" (Hallsworth et al, 2011:4) makes a case for more effective policy-making an imperative. However, I find it strange to hear ministers and civil servants, who are central to creating policy, described as producing "a narrative created and believed by a group of people which distract attention from a puzzling part of their reality" (Yanow, 1996:191). This is hardly the type of image one wishes to have of policy-making or policy-makers.

In their qualitative review and analysis of the policy-making process in government over the past fourteen years, Hallsworth et al (2011) found that attempts to make improvements to policy-making have been undermined by the gap between theory and practice

(Hallsworth et al, 2011:5). What they described as a “striking finding” emerged from their detailed study into policy-making in government:

“The picture that practitioners painted was very different from the one suggested by attempts to improve policy-making. A gap between theory and practice became apparent. In other words, policymakers lack the resources to deal with the real problems they face; they often know what they should be doing, but experience difficulties putting it into practice (Hallsworth et al, 2011:30).

I suspect that this is not an altogether surprising insight for many practitioners. Many may question how many of the euphemistically termed ‘dots’; that have the potential to facilitate links between theory and practice, actually remain to be joined or were joined-up properly in the first place. Practitioners may indeed question, and have done so in this study, if the ‘gap’ between theory and practice; that is seemingly so elusive to bridge, is the result of inadequate policies assembled by insufficiently informed policy-makers.

The findings, from this 2011 report, identified a number of specific problems. It was suggested that they were located in the nature of the process, qualities, structures and politics of policy-making. Hallsworth et al (2011) suggest that the dominant model of the policy process was being unrealistic in its expectation and that, whilst there was “clarity on the desired qualities of policy-making”, there was not when it came to how to achieve them. This was seen to result in attempts to embed them failing to make ‘notable progress’. Furthermore, structural changes were viewed as being ‘incoherent and incomplete’. They were viewed as facing “new challenges as Whitehall downsizes” and ministers as having a “limited view of the environment within which all policy is made” (Hallsworth et al, 2011:30).

This report is relevant to the findings of this study as it suggests several fundamental flaws in the policy-making process of government. Many academics, whilst not always making helpful suggestions to ministers and civil servants on how this situation could be improved, agree that it is a flawed process (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Some academics go as far as to describe the policy process as, “the shell of policy presented for public and media consumption” (John, 1998). Policy frameworks were cited amongst reasons for some of the difficulties experienced by this study’s respondents. Some respondents did not feel that policy frameworks, in principle, favoured one organisation over another. However, there was considerable derision over the interpretation and application of national policy frameworks that focused on the third sector as if all constituent organisations had similar needs. There was further criticism of policy initiatives that did not fully reflect the realities that were precipitated from different types of organisational practices with highly differentiated levels of resources. The next section explores the implications of this study for practice.

8.3.2 Implications for learning and skills provision

The research findings from this study indicate that there are implications that can result from a reduction in learning and skills provision and in the diversity of organisations that provide it. This study’s participants believed that the key factors that influenced their capacity to deliver learning and skills provision, and to be able respond to the learning and skills needs of their learners and the broader client groups they supported, were first and foremost trust-based. Some of the participants felt that, irrespective of their worsening financial situations, their most significant loss was that of the strong bonds of trust they believed had existed between them and other agencies from across the organisational

spectrum. This was felt to be, in part, due to the increasingly competitive tendering and contract-based environment in which collaborative forms of multi-sector delivery modes are now becoming the norm (McLaughlin et al, 2002).

This environment was believed to favour larger organisations and more mainstream providers, such as further education establishments who might draw third sector providers into pre-ordained programmes to deliver an aspect of training within a community context. This raised concerns amongst third sector agencies that providers of learning and skills development were becoming more centralised, directed and controlled within mainstream provision. As a consequence, it was thought to be less likely to respond or be responsive to, the often differentiated needs of learners and the context in which they are located. In turn, this was being experienced as the ‘Tesco effect’ as one VCO manager termed it:

“When they want to squeeze out the local competition, they buy it up and sometimes keep the original name so that nobody knows it has changed - or in the case of VSOs, absorb us and re-brand us as TSOs.”

This comment suggested a move towards reducing the diversity of organisations that were able to deliver learning and skills provision.

8.3.3 Implications for individuals and their organisations

All participants confirmed that being given the opportunity to discuss partnership-working had felt ‘strangely liberating’; in that it allowed them an ‘uncontaminated space’ in which to discuss, explore, criticise and suggest ways to make it work better locally. It was suggested that there was room to improve local and regional provision through the development of more networks of loose and strong alliances (Onyx and Bullen, 2000).

Participants believed that not enough local providers challenged the status quo of partnership practices. This was believed to reinforce the 'status quo' of 'dominant public sector agencies' and what Huxham and Vangen (2005) describe as 'collaborative thuggery'. This study also highlighted an important issue concerning the lack of safeguarding practices in place to address the increasing levels of professional and financial risk-taking that organisations are either being exposed to or exposing themselves to through their collaborative activities.

8.3.4 Implications for my professional practice

This research has enabled me to investigate an area of professional interest; namely voluntary and community organisations and partnership-working, by conducting a small-scale study which has spanned over six years, part-time. It has taken place alongside a full-time professional role and it has provided me with the opportunity to investigate an area of practice that I have been involved with as part of my professional responsibilities and experiences. I have been fortunate in being able to find the funding for this research study. Unfortunately, the contraction in public funding may have made it increasingly more difficult for individuals and smaller VCOs to obtain funding to conduct independent research into their own areas of practice. As a result of conducting this study, and after its completion, it has enabled me to initiate a number of opportunities to work with new organisations; delivering enterprising, innovative and differentiated learning and skills courses across the North West. Collaborative activities have also extended into developing training materials (see example Appendix 8 for use in training initiatives); consultancy services and establishing a social enterprise as a mechanism through which to develop new

initiatives. These have precipitated new working relationships and business opportunities through which to engage voluntary and community organisations.

As a provider of learning and skills development, I have embraced opportunities to work in partnerships across the North West of England to facilitate innovative ways of building confidence, skills and qualifications for learners. The issue of collating and presenting a coherent 'picture' of the nature of this type of learning and skills development would be the type of empirical research that could provide one of the much needed 'bridges' between this practice and the policy frameworks through which it takes place.

8.4 Possibilities for further research and practical development activity

This study has yielded several promising directions for future research on cross-boundary, inter-organisational partnership-working. This section is divided into two sub-sections; constituting a theoretical and a practical focus on the development of this area of research.

8.4.1 Theoretical development

It has been suggested in the literature there are a number of power asymmetries that have the potential to constitute 'fault-lines' in the relationships between partners: a fact evident from this study's participant accounts of the dynamics of working in partnership with other agencies. This is an area that could provide further avenues for theory development. It has also been suggested in this thesis that collaborative partnership initiatives are constituted of a number of contradictory dynamics that undermine their effectiveness to offer support to

learners in a sustainable way. It has also brought into question the levels of expectation being levied on them. The findings from this study have suggested that participants were increasingly aware of the factors which affected their partnerships, such as problems associated with funding, increased accountability and power imbalances. Trust was identified as the single most important factor in determining how well collaborations worked. According to McQuaid (2000), “the underlying basis of the partnership may be a high level of trust”. As the theory and practice around trust has suggested, conceptualising and articulating what ‘trust’ and ‘risk’ are, and how they affect the collaborative activities of third sector agencies and their partners, still offer significant avenues for research activity.

8.4.2 Practical development

Several participants suggested the idea of ‘seed funding’ - designated amounts of funding from different sources i.e. business, charity, members of the public - specifically targeted at offering some financial support for individuals or organisations, who have a proposal to research a particular aspect of their practice or to develop an enterprising initiative. There is the potential, with this type of initiative, to collaborate with local further and higher educational professional development initiatives. This was suggested as an area that some participants had already experienced but had felt that it had the potential for further development. The idea of jointly ‘badging’ professional development module awards, with local third sector organisations, was suggested as a route through which local agencies could raise their professional profile and contribute directly to some of the training initiatives being delivered by third sector support agencies.

The creation of a nationally-linked, but locally-accessed, electronically-networked knowledge base; comprising of resources, research and practitioner materials could provide an area for development. This could be accessible by a registered database of public, private and third sector organisations on a membership basis. It could be established as a social enterprise and operated by a consortium of third sector agencies. An enterprising initiative with a strong research focus could have the potential to generate income and be self-sustaining as a social enterprise. It could fund its own research programmes, offer training materials and branded merchandise for organisations and learners and provide more of a focus on working with third sector organisations as partners in researching their own practice. It could also provide a central source of funding to support capacity-building initiatives within and between organisations.

Connected to the previous suggestion, is the idea of developing student internships and to locate them within local third sector organisations. This idea was expressed, by some of this study's participants, as an idea that would benefit their organisations and the sector in general. A work-based learning approach was felt to allow for undergraduate and postgraduate skills acquisition and a flow of motivated, enterprising individuals with a range of skills that could be developed within and for the sector.

Finally, the idea of funding and supporting small-scale, level one training that provides first-step opportunities for learners, was identified by respondents as, not only vital provision for many learners, but viewed as being difficult to find sustainable funding for. Further research is required to ascertain why funding is difficult to secure and to sustain for learners whose needs are below the level usually on offer from many mainstream providers. Given the implications that learning and skills development has for social

cohesion, human, social and economic capital, it is important to be able to provide learners with differentiated routes into learning and skills development (Watters, 2005).

8.5 Contributions to knowledge

This section suggests the need for research to move towards a better narrative concerning collaborative, cross-sector, multi-agency ways of providing services in general. The main purpose of this study was presented in the introductory chapter: to investigate how the experience of delivering learning and skills training in partnership affects voluntary and community organisations and to create models to highlight them. The theoretical and practical contributions of this study are presented in this section.

The literature and the findings presented from this study, suggest that there are no models or theoretical perspective of partnership and partnership-working involving voluntary and community organisations that has the breadth and depth to be able to fully represent the elements and dynamics that constitute it. The literature and this study's findings represent a complex, fragmented and layered typology that was difficult to investigate and challenging to articulate. Added to this, is the contradictory nature of many of its theoretical constituents and the contradictions that overlay them from the experiences of individuals. This provides additional layers of paradox between the layers of perspectives, theories, expectation and experiences of practitioners. Whilst the theories analysed in Chapter Two, and discussed in Chapter Seven, present a way of conceptualising and theorising, it is only in the assembling of perspectives that 'a pattern of conceptual devices, theories and perspectives' can emerge (Foucault, 1980). However, it is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact (Wittgenstein, 1953:131).

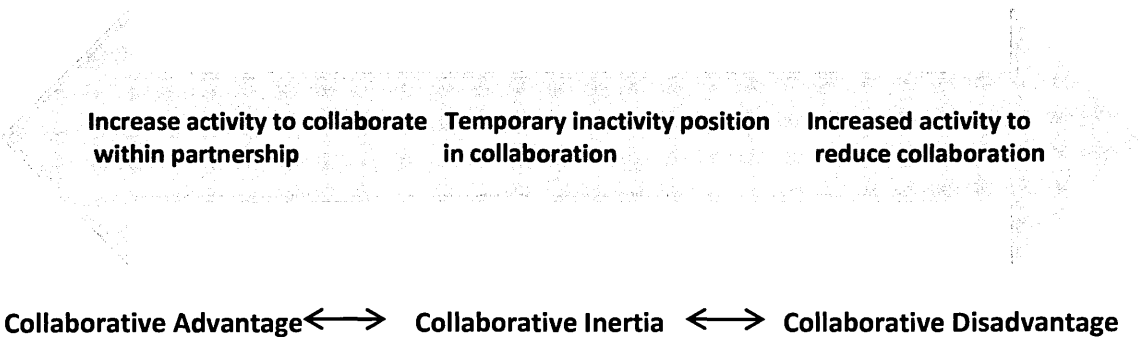
This study makes an original contribution to the existing knowledge base by exploring this under-researched area of professional practice and by providing simplified models through which to conceptualise multi-agency partnership working involving voluntary and community organisations. This model utilises metaphor as a device for articulating the typology of this study. The review of the literature and the analysis from this study, suggest that partnership working is an active rhetorical device, drives organisational change, facilitates change agents, has high levels of expectation levied upon it, is full of paradoxes, expectations and is poorly understood.

This thesis has presented a review of the policy landscape of partnership and partnership working involving voluntary and community agencies and their partners in the delivery of learning and skills opportunities. Studies of partnership have been dominated by a rhetoric in the literature that has presented a bewildering array of conceptualisations relating to partnership; each dominated by their own set of assumptions and implications. Whilst abundant in conceptual devices, it has become evident that it is lacking in an overarching theoretical narrative that enables those who wish to research it to understand the complexity, contradictions and perspectives that present themselves as a multi-layered 'rugged landscape'. The original remit for commencing this research was to understand the dynamics within local communities that were resulting in significantly different outcomes for practitioners and learners. Collaborative learning and skills provision is being located within an increasingly regulated funding and accountability framework and overlaid with a thick 'blanket' of recursive rhetoric extolling the merits of partnership as this study has shown.

8.5.1 Conceptualising and modelling the landscape of collaboration

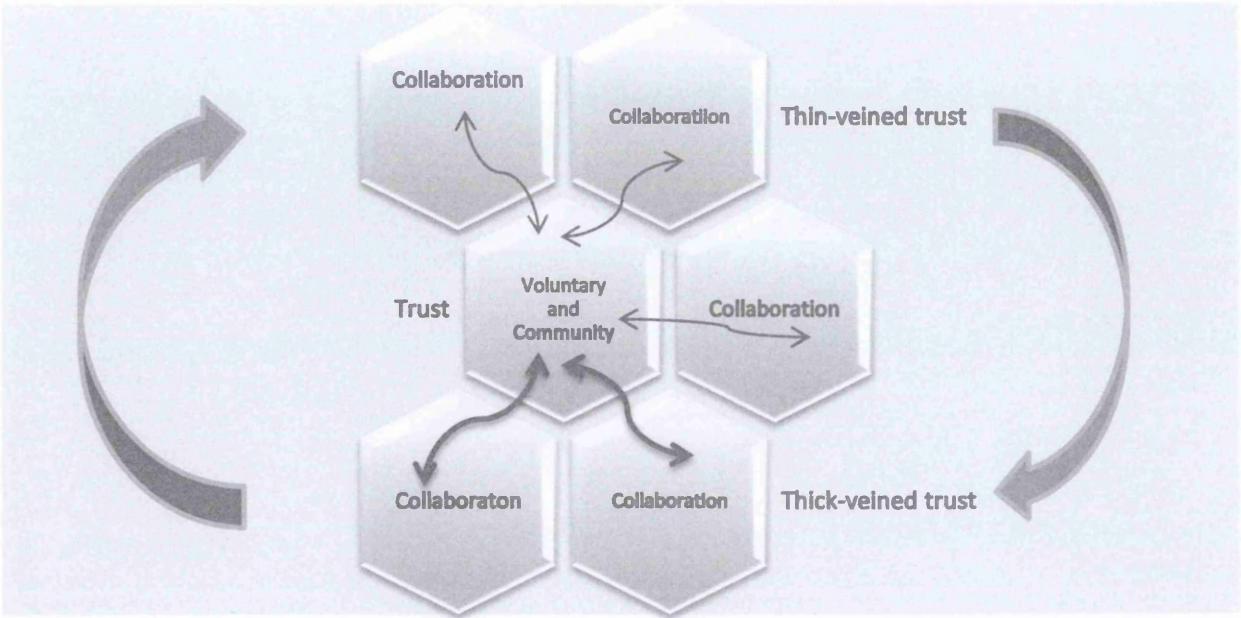
This section presents three conceptualisations to have emerged from this study. The first (8.1) presents partnership working as a scale of partnership activity which oscillates between increased activity to collaborate and increased activity to reduce it. This highlights the notion of tension and paradox between partners and highlights the area on the spectrum that represents collaborative inertia.

Figure 8.1 A spectrum of collaborative activity (Adapted from Huxham, 2003)



The next model, Figure 8.2, presents a conceptualisation of the role of trust within collaborative relationships. The model presents a visualisation of the move across organisational landscapes and the potential for changes to the nature of the trust. It utilises Newton’s (1997) paired metaphorical conceptualisations of ‘thin trust’ and ‘thick trust’. The wavy arrows represent each by way of a thick or thin line. The long arrows indicate the fluidity of organisations moving between these notions of trust during their collaborative interactions.

Figure 8.2. The trust ‘mosaic’ of multi-agency collaboration
 (Adapted from Newton’s (1997) use of the phrases ‘thick trust’ and ‘thin trust’)



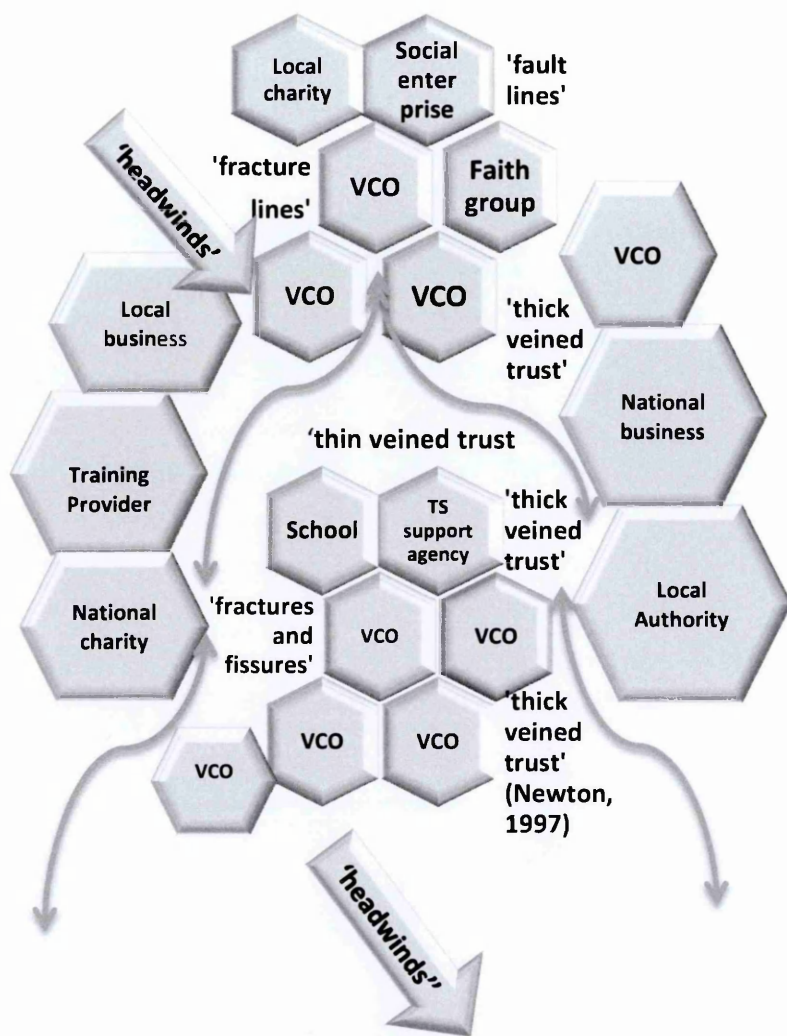
The next model, Figure 8.3, represents a simplistic two-dimensional, abstract conception from the ‘imaginings’ of this researcher. In examining the real and theoretical contextual typology of multi-agency relationships, between voluntary and community organisations and their partners, initially a fractal pattern formed in my mind as I grappled to create a boundary to this study. This ‘image’ competed with the notion of trying to represent this arena of research as a ‘kaleidoscope of mosaic tiles where some fit together well, whilst others overlay or produce noticeable gaps. The tessellations represent more equitable collaborative activity; the overlapping tiles represent competition and disharmony. The notion of a ‘kaleidoscope of mosaic tiles’, provides the opportunity to represent the ‘strong and loose ties’ that have both characterized the diversity of collaborative activity in this study. It implies a somewhat ‘fractured’ typology: a landscape comprised of relationships

that are held together or held apart by 'bridges' and 'bonds' (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). This model is supported by a synthesis of the literature and the analysis of this study's interviews that suggest the idea of a fracturing of relationship between organisations and an inconsistency in the strength of these relationships. Also factored into these multi-organisational interactions are the 'headwinds' that manifest themselves in the form of policy formulations, increased accountability, regulatory frameworks and reductions in funding. Facilitation of collaborations within multi-agency teams is viewed by this study's respondents as a key aspect in the successful delivery of learning and skills services. As a 'tool' which facilitates consideration of the factors involved in effective collaboration, the proposed model may be able to inform development work in multi-agency learning and skills initiatives, by drawing attention to the sheer complexity that belies this way of working. The metaphorical 'geological fault lines and fissures' represent some of the contradictions that represent the strength and degree of the bonds and bridges of trust between agencies. The gaps represent the spaces where 'bridges' and 'bonds' are either constructed or deconstructed between individuals as they move closer together or further apart in their objectives.

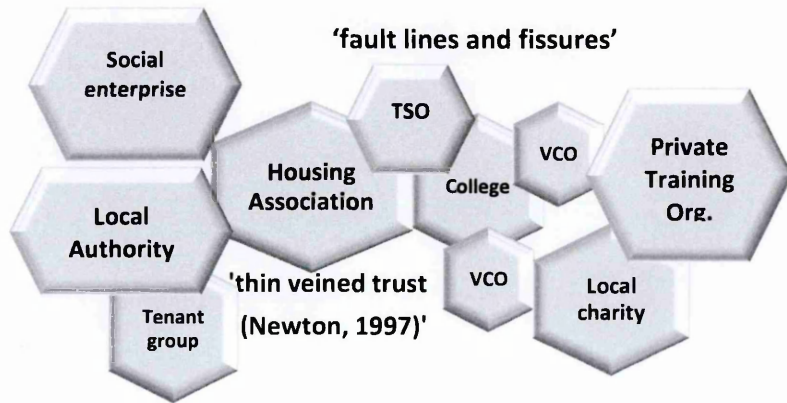
The notion of different types of collaborative activity between agencies is presented and Etzioni's (1973) notion of 'organisational structures of the future' is presented in the form of networks of alliances of 'strong and loose ties' (Onyx and Bullen, 2000). Whilst I think, as a simplistic conceptualisation, it 'captures' some of the elements suggested by this research study, it does not do justice to the complexity or levels that have been identified and referenced in the literature.

Figure 8.3 A typology of the ‘landscape’ of inter-organisational dynamics

Inter-organisational networks of interdependence (Rhodes, 1997)



New organisational structures of ‘strong and loose ties’ (Onyx and Bullen, 2000)
‘Organisations of the future’ (Etzioni, 1973)



8.6 Conclusion

The term 'partnership' has an inherently moralistic and positive sentiment about it and is difficult to take a stance to question its integrity (McLaughlin, 2004: 103). Yet, that is exactly what this study has set out to do: to question it both theoretically and its application in practice. I have argued that the view of partnership and partnership-working as presented in the current academic literature is limited. Extending the nature of the enquiry to reflect its complex typology, is necessary for the very reason of not allowing conceptual devices to attain a high level of reverence but a low level of meaning (Walmsley, 2006). Research is a systematic investigation, and an effort to describe, predict, understand or control an educational phenomenon (Burns, 1997). It can also empower individuals within the context of the research and provide them with a voice (Mertens, 2005:2). This study's participants have demonstrated that they have a voice but that voice needs to be listened to.

This study started from a niggling thought in my head that, despite the high level of commitment invested by some agencies, sometimes collaborative partnership activities did not deliver the outcomes expected from it. The journey to Chapter Eight has been a long and difficult one. It has also provided a genuinely surprising learning event. I started with some a priori knowledge of working in partnership with other agencies in the delivery of learning and skills provision. I have ended it swamped in the realisation that what was imagined at the outset has become the real. This research study has facilitated a 'vehicle' with which to investigate an area of my professional practice that I had thought I knew well. This exploration has revealed 'a far more complicated imagined and real terrain' than I had previously appreciated. This thesis has aimed to present a synthesis of some of these insights and the outcomes of this journey.

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Appendix 1

Letter of invitation to participate in research study

Date: / /2009

Dear,

I am undertaking a research study into partnership working in adult community learning. I am looking to explore how practitioners build and sustain collaborative working partnerships and the impact they have on the learners we support across the North West of England. I am interested in exploring how voluntary and community organisations, in particular, are affected by the changing dynamics we are all witnessing. I would like to identify the different factors that are felt to impact the most on what we do and how we do it and to ask practitioners what their suggestions are to improve how learning and skills development can offer the most suitable opportunities for all learners. I am hoping to make this as rigorous a study into the above areas as possible. To achieve this I need to ask practitioners to contribute their thoughts on the matter.

I am writing this letter to request your help and to ask you to participate in this study. It will involve a commitment to a 60-90 minute interview to be conducted at a time that works for both of us and in surroundings that will enable us to speak uninterrupted for that duration. With your permission, I would ideally like to tape record the interview so that I can type it up later; a copy of which will be given to you for your suggested amendments. If, however, you do not wish me to record the interview, then I would like to take notes of what was said and then give you my notes to verify that you are happy for me to quote you within the final report of my research study.

In order to respect the privacy of all participants, all names, locations, and identifying information will be excluded from the presentation of my results. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me (telephone number given). I can, of course, return your call if you wish at a time convenient to you. If you have any particular questions that you wish to address to my doctoral supervisor about the study that I am not able to answer, then my research supervisor has asked me to request that you email any questions to him at his works address. He will get back to you. My research supervisor at the Open University is: Dr Peter Lavender. His email is:.....

May I thank you for your cooperation and I look forward to working with you on this stage of the study.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Britton, MEd (Adult & Continuing Education & Training)

Full-time Educational Training & Project Manager for local training provider
Part-time student researcher on the Open University's
Doctorate in Education Programme in the Faculty of Lifelong Learning
Enclosed: Reply slip and Stamped Addressed Envelope
My contact details are: Mobile: Office telephone:Email:

REPLY SLIP

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for taking the time to consider taking part in this study.

Please complete and return the Reply Slip below in the Stamped Addressed Envelope provided.

Dear Helen,

(✓ please tick one box)

- ☐ I am sorry but I do not wish to participate in the study
- ☐ I would be happy to participate in the 60 – 90 minute interview, take part in a post-interview plenary and to check over the Interview Transcript for errata

Please send a report on the results of the project to the address I have supplied below

YES ☐ NO ☐

Additional Comments
(please note any additional issues you would like to make me aware of)

.....
.....

Address

..... Post code

Yours sincerely,

..... Name (Please Print and Sign) Date

Appendix 2

Information Release Form

I voluntarily agree to participate in the interviews. I understand that this research study is being conducted by Helen Britton, the researcher, as the basis for her doctoral dissertation to be submitted to The Open University.

I understand that this will require my participation in at least one 60-90 minute, one-to one interview, which will include the written recording of my answers to a series of questions concerning my role and responsibilities; the service my organisation supplies as a local provider of learning and skills development and my opinions relating to third sector learning provision. I have been informed by the researcher that I will be able to read any notes she makes either during or after the interview that pertain to the answers that I have supplied to her and that I can make suggestions for them to be amended if I do not feel that they accurately reflect my answers.

It on this basis, that I grant permission for the interviews to be used only by Helen Britton for the analysis of the interview data. I grant permission for the evaluation data generated from the above methods to be published in the doctoral dissertation and future publications(s) provided that it is anonymised. I have in turn sought any necessary agreements from the organisation I represent, to participate in this study on the basis that the answers I supply are representing my views and are not necessarily those of the organisation I work/volunteer for. I understand that I can withdraw from this process at any time.

I understand that any identifiable information in regard to my name and/or my organisation's name will not be listed in the dissertation or in any future publication(s).

_____ Research Participant's Name

_____ Date

Appendix 3

List of research participants

Key: ✓ = agreed to participate in study with no specific requests
VCO/TS = voluntary and community organisation/third sector
PS = public sector PrS = Private sector
Organisations are located across the North West

Number of Interview	Organisation Type	Role/ Position	Sector
1	VCO Community Centre	Administrator	TS
2	VCO Community Centre (large)	Manager, volunteer	“
3	VCO Community Centre	Treasurer, volunteer	“
4	VCO Voluntary and Community group	Administrator Trainer	“
5	VCO Voluntary and Community group	Funding administrator	“
6	VCO Charity (funding/advice)	Manager, trainer	“

Number of Interview	Organisation Type	Role/ Position	Sector
7	Charity (local small)	Manager, trainer	TS
8	Charity National (local branch)	Manager	“
9	Charity (local small)	Trainer	“
10	National faith organisation	Community Liaison Worker	“
11	Faith Organisation (local)	Manager	“
12	Tenant and residents association	Chairperson, volunteer	“
13	Infrastructure support Agency	Trainer	“
14	Social Enterprise (staff/volunteers)	Trainer, VCO volunteer	“
15	Social Enterprise	Manager	“
16	Housing Association (regional)	Manager	“
17	Housing Association (national)	Volunteer	“

Number of Interview	Organisation Type	Role/ Position	Sector
18	Local Authority	Manager	PS
19	Local Authority	Community Liaison	“
20	School (secondary)	Community Liaison Officer	“
21	College (further education/F.E.)	F.E. tutor/ Community trainer	“
22	Small medium Enterprise (SME/local)	Owner, trainer	PrS
23	Small medium Enterprise (SME, local)	Owner, trainer	PrS
24	Business enterprise, regional	Owner/ VCO volunteer	PrS
25	National company	Manager, (community link/ volunteer)	PrS

Appendix 4

Interview Guideline Protocol

Source: 'Research Journal'

The following is to serve as an initial guideline for me, the researcher and for each interview conducted as part of this study. It also serves part of the **Interview Schedule** for this study.

1. Introduce myself

- qualify my position at the outset of contact with the person
- explain my professional affiliations are - both work and research
- review the purpose and topic of the research study

2. After the initial introduction and brief outline of the research study

I would appreciate the opportunity to interview and work with you in developing my understanding of working in community partnerships. I am aware that you have experience of working in and/or establishing them.

3. Overview of commitment required from the participant

Outline research cycle and interview process. Stress importance to participating in interviews and how long they are. I will need to review the information which is being gathered across all interviews and this will inform my decisions on the need to approach individual participants for further data gathering opportunities through more in-depth interviews. Ask if they might be interested in extending their involvement. Mention the scheduling appointments for interviews at the convenience of both parties.

4. Formal request to record interviews

I need to request permission to record the interviews and to seek written confirmation of this. Give/post permission slip and an 'Information Release Form' (Appendix A1/2). Make sure both are signed. At outset of interview, then say:

“Would you mind if I made notes during our interview as it helps me to record key point of our discussions? You are, of course, free to ask me to show you what I am noting down regarding your answers.”

Follow this with:

“If you feel uncomfortable or feel that it is inappropriate to record a particular comment from our interview, then please ask me to not record it in my notes. Can I

assure you though that what is discussed is fully anonymised in the analysis of the data.”

5. Participant review of the interview notes

Say: “Once the interview has been written up I will pass it to you to check that what I have written down, in response to my questions, are representative of your answers to them. Please make any amendment in a different coloured pen on the copies I send you and return them to me, if you don’t mind, as soon as is possible. Please use the space to write any modifications you feel are necessary to clarify your answers further or to correct an error in my interpretation of them.

Say: Thank you for taking the time to do this. It is much appreciated.

Appendix 4

Interview Questions and Guidance	
Interview no.	
Respondent Code	
Date of interview	
Location conducted	
Duration of interview	Interrupted () Not interrupted ()

Checklist prior to the interview			
Things to do (✓)		Notes	
1	Check environment for the interview is still conducive – in terms of disturbance, noise, air, light, seating, drinks		
2	Introduce myself		
3	Thank the respondent for their time		
4	Reiterate the purpose of the research	Briefly	
5	Confirm again that I have their permission to record their responses to the question and by what means (notes, digital recorder)	Show previously signed pro forma	
6	Reiterate the opportunity for the respondent to ask questions during the interview but encourage them to defer, wherever possible, to the end		
7	Explain any particular terms and the procedure for the interview and how the answers to the question are recorded and the transcript returned to them		
8	Start the interview		
Observation Comments			
During the interview		After the interview	

Appendix 4

The following is a generalized interview guide utilized for the first stage of interviewing. Subsequent interviews were tailored to each participant and based upon the notes made by me during and immediately after each interview. These were used to structure a series of more in-depth questioning.

Interview Protocol

Name:	Location:	Date: Time: Reschedule needed:
--------------	------------------	---

Interview Questions

INITIAL
CODE

Structured /guided questions 1-6

1. What is the title of your role/position?

2. What are your key job functions?

3. How long have been in your present position?

4. Have any changes have taken place to your job specification?

Prompt perhaps? Have you been given/taken on any additional roles/tasks/activities that are not part of your original job spec?
Are they now part of your job?

5. How frequently do you work in partnership with other organisations?

6. Which types of organisations do you work in partnership with?

Prompt perhaps? What types of roles do they have? Local Authority

7a. Does your organisation deliver learning and skills opportunities as part of partnership working?

7b. Which do you offer? Prompt: numeracy, diy, IT etc

Semi-structured/In-depth (more probing) questions 8-14

8. What are the most important reasons why your organisation works in partnership with other organisations?

9. What benefits can you identify to working as part of a local partnership?

Prompt: How would you describe the benefits (a) to you and (b) your organisations of your participation in local partnership working?

- tangible and intangible
- information gathering: what's going on/keeping informed/being at the front for new
- monetary i.e. funding securing from partners or identification of sources

10. What do you see as your organisations contribution to the:
on the ground information/proposed solutions to issues in the community

11. What are your organisations expectations of the people/ organisations you partner with?
contribution to solution, provision of information, funding, raised profile

12. Do you see any strengths or weaknesses in the partnership- working model for community learning?

13. What are the long term implications of community learning partnerships?

14. Do you have any suggestions of how things could be improved?
If so, what?

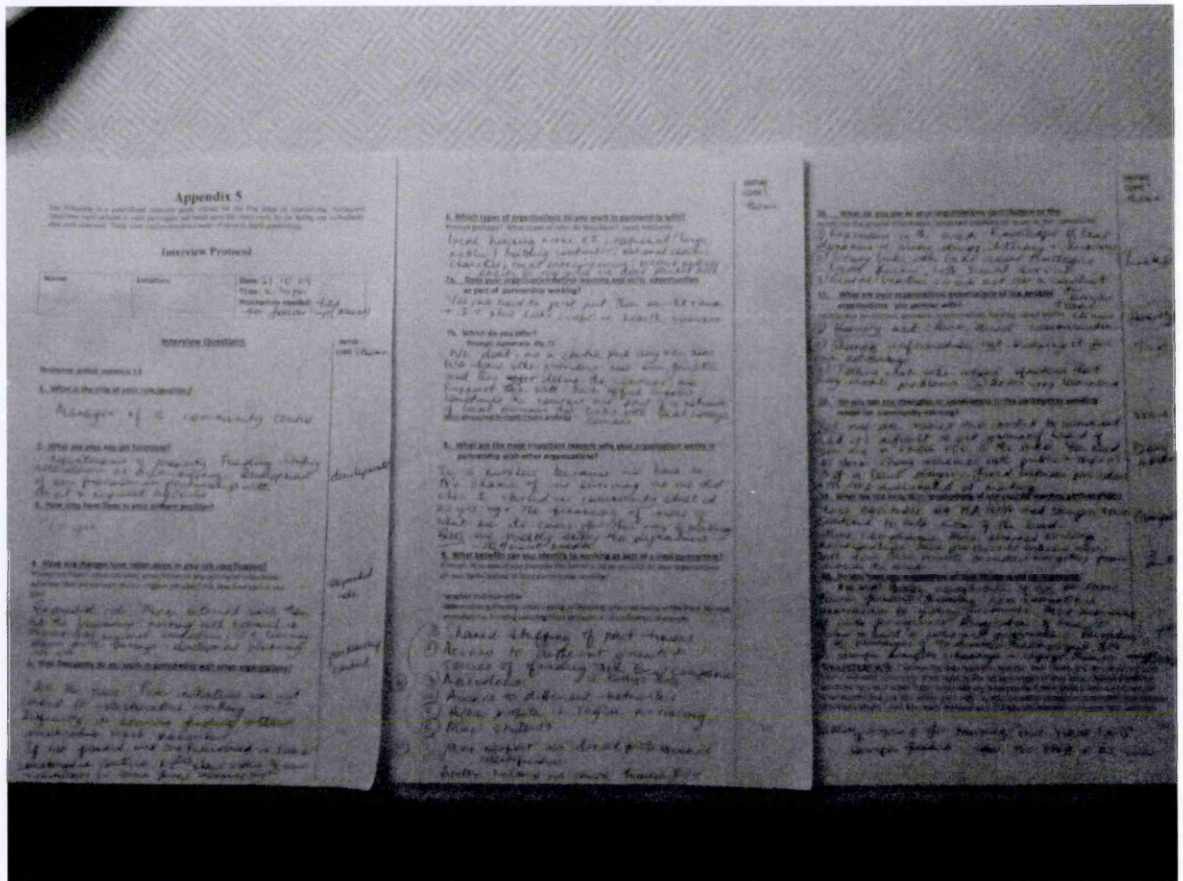
END INTERVIEW: That was the final interview question. May I thank you very much for your time. I will send you a copy of my notes within the next couple of days with a stamped address envelope for you to return them to me with any amendments. Please make a note next to any of your answers that you feel don't fully capture accurately enough the detail you felt you gave. I will then make the necessary changes and then show you next time we meet.

Appendix 5

Interview responses

Sample Question Protocol with fourteen questions.

Three sheets per interview plus additional notes as required and additional respondent correspondence i.e. email



The following represents sample interview notes.

Interview sheet 1.

Interview Protocol

Name:	Location:	Date: 21.10.09 Time: 2.30pm Reschedule needed: <u>yes</u> <u>for follow-up (2 days)</u>
-------	-----------	--

Interview Questions

INITIAL
CODE 12/09

Structured / guided questions 1-6

1. What is the title of your role/position?

Manager of a community centre

2. What are your key job functions?

Maintenance & property Funding Shopping attendance at area meetings. Development of new provision in partnership with local & regional agencies.

development

3. How long have been in your present position?

10 yrs.

4. Have any changes have taken place to your job specification?

Prompt perhaps? Have you been given/taken on any additional roles/tasks/activities that are not part of your original job spec? Are they now part of your job?

Expanded role "More external work than at the beginning: meeting with council re. overarching regional initiatives, local learning plans for the borough, development planning etc etc"

expanded role

5. How frequently do you work in partnership with other organisations?

"All the time. Few initiatives are not linked to collaborative working. Difficulty in securing funding without collaborative input. Sometimes. If not funded, we are involved in some collaborative venture. We still share some of our volunteers so some times we work with

partnership central

6. Which types of organisations do you work in partnership with?
 Prompt: perhaps? What types of roles do they have? Local Authority

Local housing assns. x2, national (large
 public) building contractor, national chain
 Charities, local entrepreneurs, ^{teachers and off}
 easier to say who we don't partner with

7a. Does your organisation deliver learning and skills opportunities
 as part of partnership working?

Yes, we used to just put them on lit + music
 + IT plus some craft + health courses.

7b. Which do you offer?

Prompt: numeracy, diy, IT

We don't, as a centre put any on offer.
 We have other providers use our facilities
 and they offer deliver the courses, we
 support them with back office support.
 Sometimes the courses are part of a network
 of local provision that links with local college
 Semi-structured/in-depth (more probing) courses.

8. What are the most important reasons why your organisation works in
 partnership with other organisations?

In a nutshell because we have to.
 No chance of us surviving as we did
 when I started in community adult ed
 20 yrs. ago. The financing of most of
 what we do comes from the way of working
 But we mostly enjoy the dynamics.
 - different modes.

9. What benefits can you identify to working as part of a local partnership?

Prompt: How would you describe the benefits (a) to you and (b) your organisations
 of your participation in local partnership working?

- tangible and intangible

Information gathering: what's going on/keeping informed/being at the front for new
 monetary i.e. funding securing from partners or identification of sources

- ① Shared staffing of part-timers
- ② Access to different grants +
 series of funding from local companies
 e.g. Kellogg's B&M
- ③ New ideas
- ④ Access to different networks
- ⑤ Higher profile in region as an org.
- ⑥ More students.
- ⑦ More respect as local professional
 identification
 Better salaries as more hours F/T.

INITIAL CODE
Hew2

10. What do you see as your organisations contribution to the
transfer of the ground information/proposed solutions to issues in the community

① Experience in the area. Knowledge of local
dynamics to create change, literacy & awareness
② Strong links with local school colleges
③ Local firms, LHA, Social service
④ Local leaders so we act as a conduit

11. What are your organisations expectations of the people/
organisations you partner with?

① Honesty and clear, direct communication
② Sharing information not keeping it for
own advantage
③ Talking each other about factors that
may create problems & determining learners

12. Do you see any strengths or weaknesses in the partnership working
model for community learning?

Yes not all voices are invited to comment
and it's difficult to get yourself heard if
you are a small SCO in the area. You need
to form strong alliances with public & private
Not a level playing field between providers
LHA/LHA dominated at meetings

13. What are the long term implications of community learning partnerships?

Less equitable as HA/LHA cost larger SCOs
Continue to take more of the lead
More campaigning. More strained working
relationships. More problems to achieve more
with less. More private providers competing from
outside the area.

14. Do you have any suggestions of how things could be improved?

If so, what? Better recognition of all partners.
Formal funding. Training. Less competitive
approaches to getting resources. More awareness
of each for agencies. Keep active. If time, it
helps to build a coherent programme. Recognise
the challenges of the current unemployment. Get
in specific benefits including to engage both in anything

END INTERVIEW. That was the final interview question. Now I think you were much for you
here. I will send you a copy of my notes within the next couple of days, with a stamped address
envelope for you to return them to me with any amendments. Please make a note next to any of
your answers that you feel others don't fully capture accurately enough or in the detail you felt you
had shared given. I will then make the necessary changes and then show you what mine we could

Many thanks for training time I said I felt
specific feedback after the staff in the area

links
Honesty
Trust
Voices
Strong
alliances
Competition
Rule
Training
Skills

Appendix 6

Summary of Factors from the initial review of the literature

No.	Document	Factors identified from the literature regarding position of voluntary sector organisations (VS) and the importance of partnership working
1	<p>National Council for Voluntary Organisation (NCVO) (2009) Clark, J., Dobbs, J., Kane, D., Wilding, K.</p> <p>‘The State and the Voluntary Sector: Recent trends in government funding and public service delivery’</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - local government’s relationship with the sector vital but complex characterised by a wide range of practices including VS shaping the life of their communities; recognised in the emphasis on local partnerships - longstanding history of partnership between VS and the state - accounts for 2.2% of government expenditure on public services despite playing a greater role in public service delivery - direct and mediated relationships the VS seen at the heart of civil society - central feature of the VS is its independence from the public and private sectors - delivery of public services - increased dependency on income from service delivery - inequality in relationship with service commissioners - restricted geographical bases due to funding restrictions and reduction in independence - influence of deteriorating market conditions and relationship to public service delivery role
2	<p>HM Treasury Public Enquiry Unit (April 2002)</p> <p>‘Working Together: Effective Partnership Working from the Ground</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - working in partnership is an important part of public service delivery - true and effective partnership working can be very difficult to achieve - true partnership working is the only way to address some of the government’s most challenging long-term social and economic objectives - partnership need the same sort of funding arrangements that government departments have to support their long-term planning and delivery - two key aims of the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP’s) framework are to produce more effective partnership working at the local level and to bring about some rationalization of existing partnerships but disincentivise them to do so
3	<p>HM Treasury Cabinet Office (July 2007)</p> <p>‘The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration: final report’</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - third sector organisations (TSO’s) drive and energise many of the most important changes in our society - make an increasing contribution to the economy with a turnover of over £27 billion a year (Source: Annual Small Business Survey, Department of Trade and Industry, 2005)

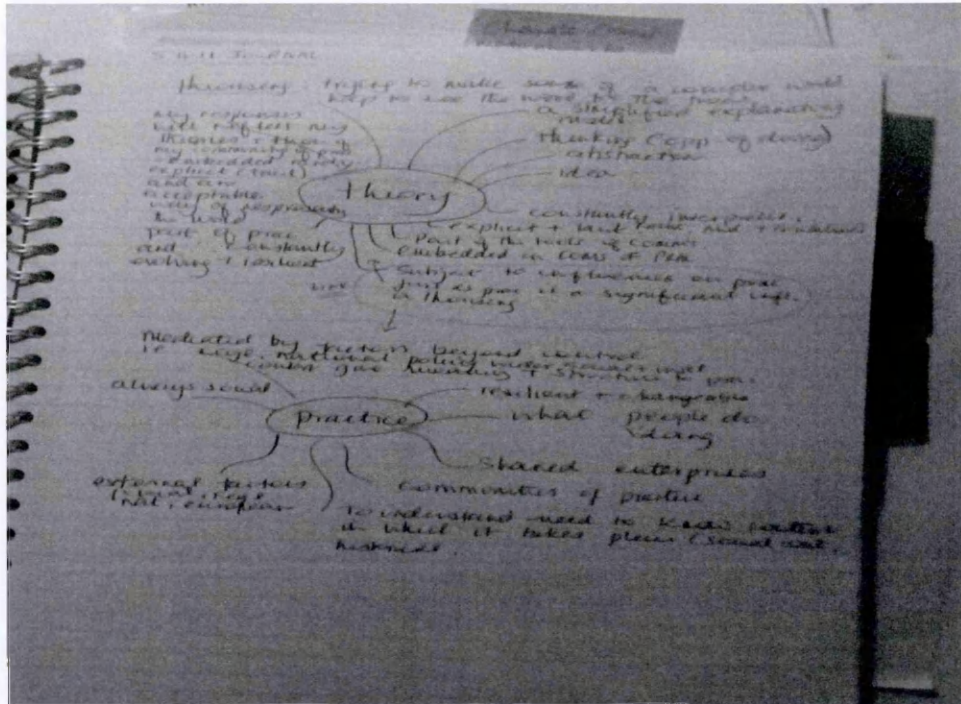
3		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Charity Commission data highlights rapid growth of many large charities and the decline in the income of many small or medium-sized charities Source: The UK Voluntary Sector Almanac, NCVO, (2007) - The Government consider that public service delivery by the sector can bring significant benefits if organisations wish to enter into such partnerships - partners in innovation; partners in designing services - programme to build the third sector evidence base - better mechanisms to drive best practice in funding the third sector and building its capacity - over the next ten years the focus needs to be more on local partnership and the Government has put effort into improving partnerships at a national level
4	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Strategic Partnering Taskforce: Final Report (March 2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - development of partnership policy - partnership as a way of improving performance and delivering efficiencies - taking the partnership agenda forward - widening the focus of partnership - promoting partnerships with local government help policy implementation and to improve service delivery - working more closely with the voluntary and community sector and other parties in service delivery to develop wider markets - to maintain the impetus towards working in partnership - the importance of partnership in addressing the need for cost efficiency - to support all policy areas where local authorities need better partnership working to improve service quality and value for money - to identify and seek to remove barriers to partnership working where necessary
5	Department for Communities and Local Government (October 2006) 'Strong and prosperous communities' The Local Government White Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is vital that partners from the public, private and particularly the third sector work together to identify problems, develop solutions - recognition of role of partnership and different forms of collaborative activity to achieve objectives
6	Cabinet Office of the Third Sector Ipsos MORI (2008) 'National Survey of Third Sector Organisations'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unprecedented level of information and insight into the third sector at local and national level - measures key local government performance target: National Indicator 7 (N17) – An Environment for a Thriving Third Sector - 48,939 third sector organisations responded to the survey – a 47% response rate - where third sector organisations and local statutory bodies are in contact with each other, then the positive impact that local statutory bodies are having is generally more positive

7	Ministry for Justice Third Sector Strategy [Consultation Paper, December 2007] ‘Improving policies and securing better public services through effective partnership’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - third sector strategy for England and Wales to better service public services - develop contribution of voluntary and community organisations to develop policy and service provision
8	Cabinet Office Office of the Third Sector: ‘Better together: improving consultation with the third sector (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of the importance of the voices of individuals, organisations and communities in marginalized areas - nurture of environment for third sector to work in partnership with government
9	Compact Independence Matters Guidance on the benefits for the government and the third sector (June 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - independence: freedom from control and influence from government - Government and third sector face dilemmas that affect independence. At the root are: accountability, funding, service design, campaigning and representation of voice

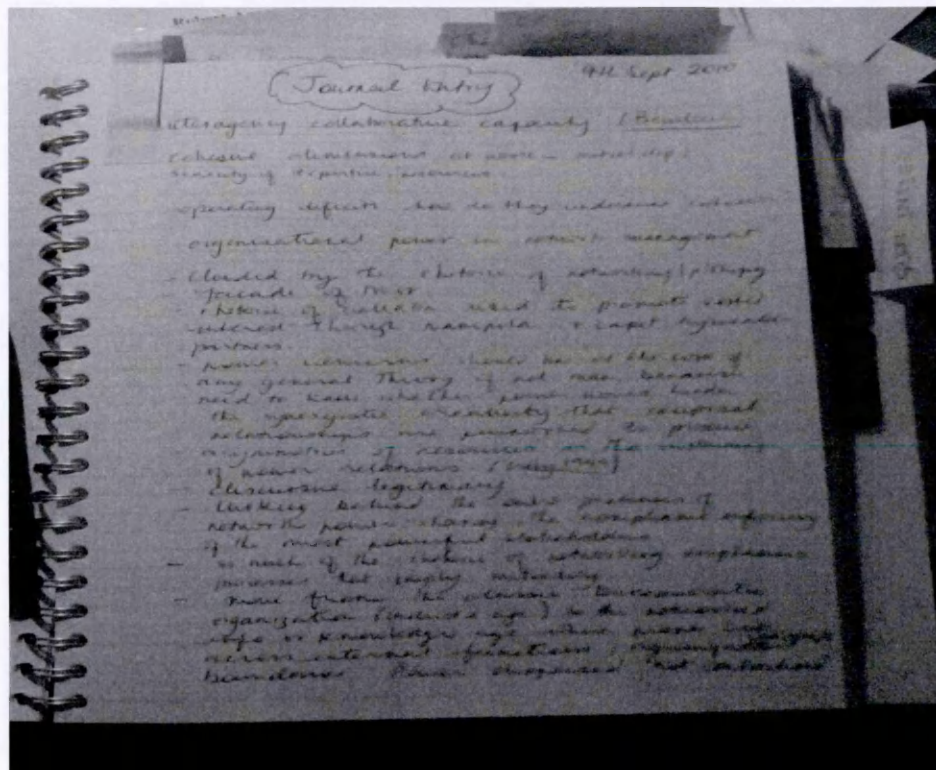
Appendix 7

Research Journal Extracts

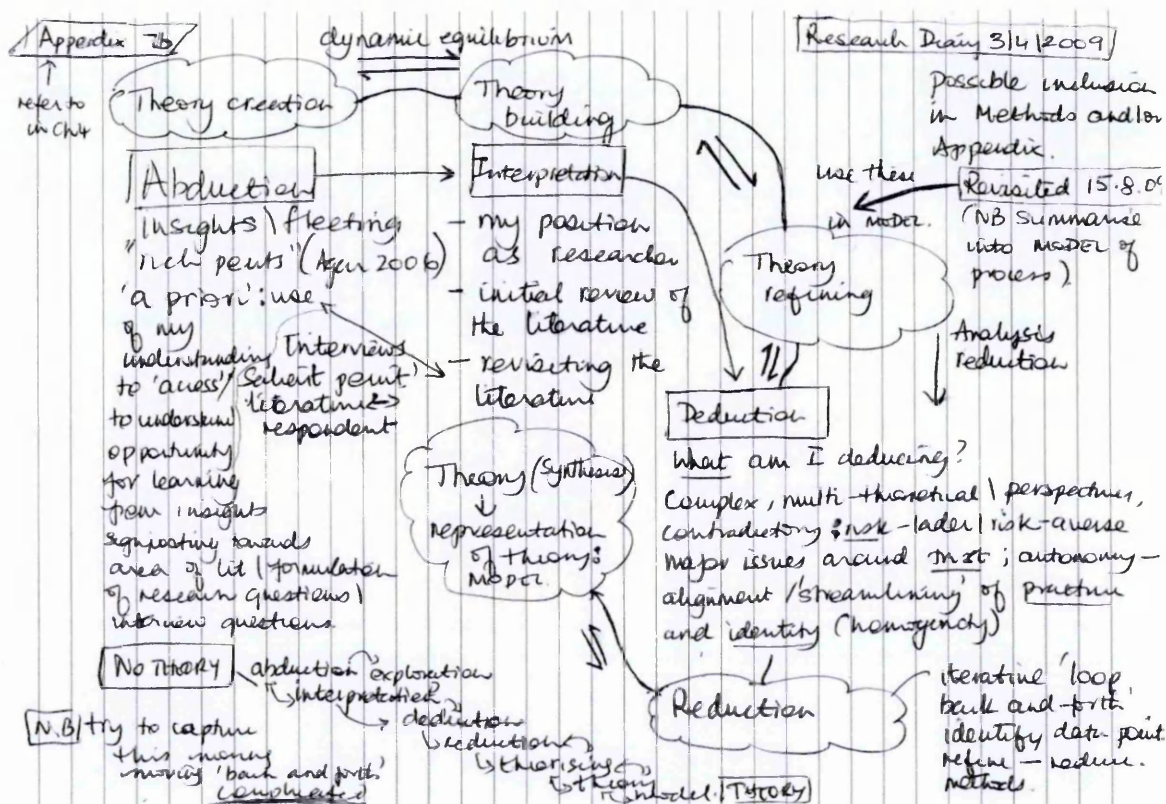
Extract from 5th April 2011 'Theory and Practice'



Extract from 9th September 2010 'Exploratory notes on organisational power'



Extract from 3rd April 2009 'Abduction to Deduction'



Appendix 8

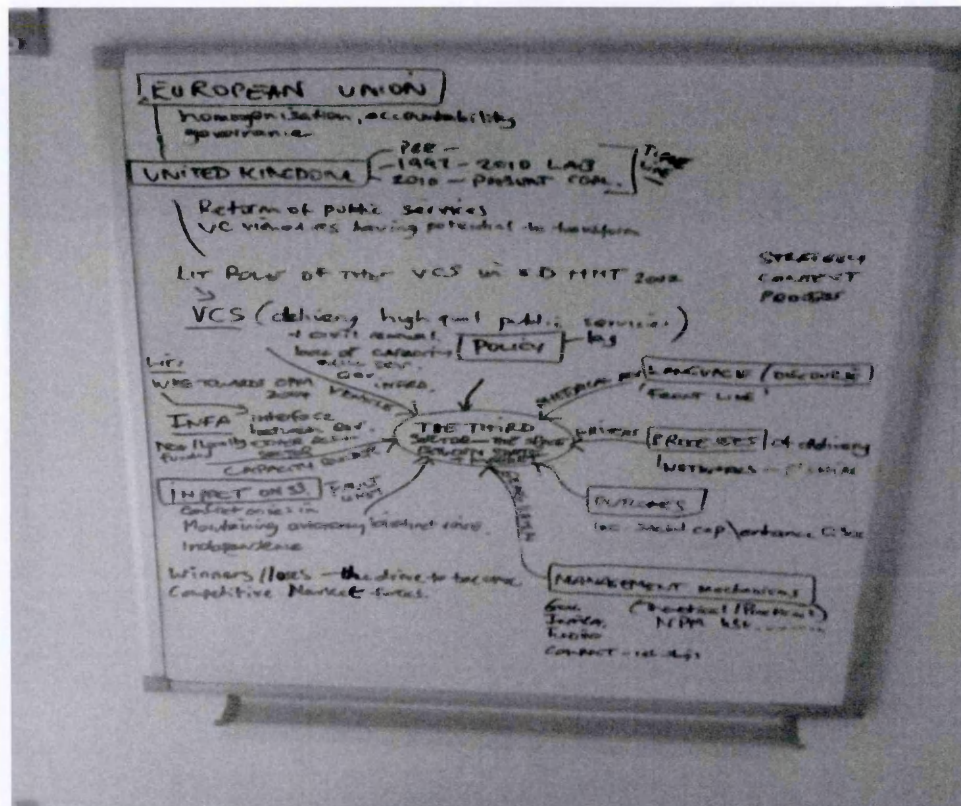
Source: Helen Britton for use with colleagues on 'Improving Collaborative Practice' workshops, 2011

CCCA Scale		
Nature of collaboration	Disadvantages	Advantages
<u>Competing</u>	competitive edge less collaboration sustained conflict	innovative and creative solutions to complex problems
<u>Compromising</u>	solutions often temporary and require re-negotiation ongoing power struggles, ineffective negotiations and unnecessary confrontations later on	both sides have compelling interests to reach a quick solution
<u>Collaborating</u>	time required to collaborate effectively in order to accomplish goals need for effective communication skills to enhance groups ability to collaborate and to manage any tensions and conflicts	integrating solutions building relationships and trust merging ideas creation of mutually agreed ways of working
<u>Accommodating</u>	ignore own concerns in preference to satisfying the concerns of partners limit relationship and trust building can facilitate apathy and 'grudge-building' between partners can limit outcomes for partnership and individual partners	can facilitate short-term good will can facilitate quick start with less need to discuss equitable working practices agreeable to all partners short-term

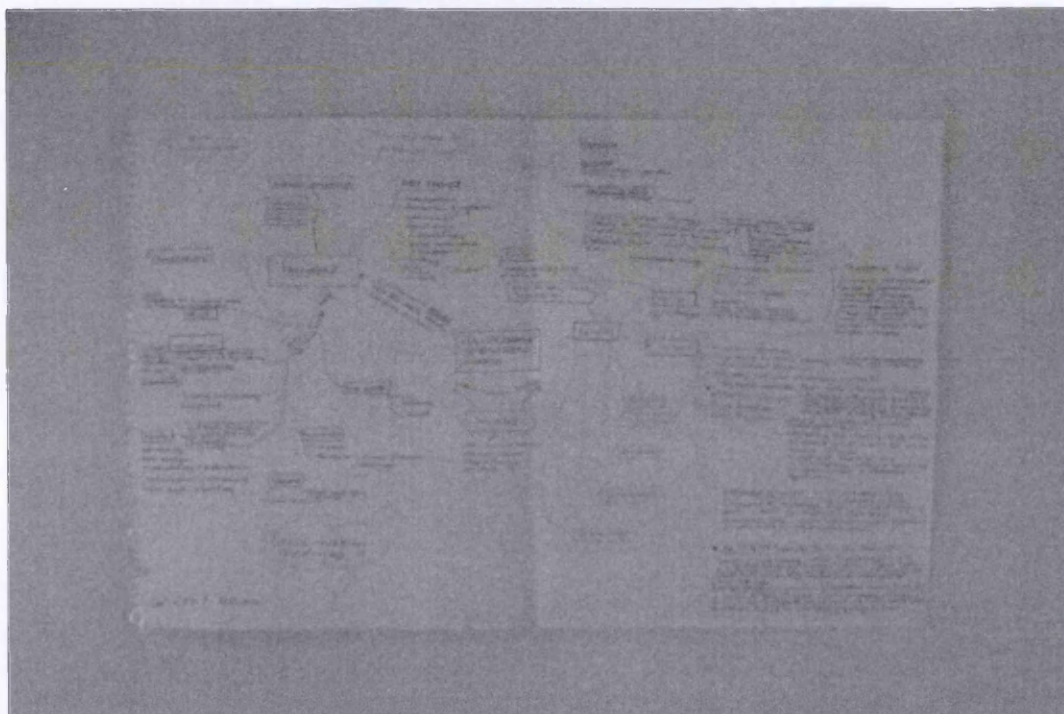
Appendix 9

Sense-making from a complex terrain: AI mind maps

Map 1: Exploring the terrain of third sector relationships



Map 2: Partnership-working: networks of complexity



Appendix 10

Coding: Extract example from 'Department for Communities and Local Government
'Strong and prosperous communities: The Local Government White Paper (October 2006:9)

